The Paris Review

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John Banville, Nadine Gordimer Fiction
Jorie Graham, Edward Hirsch Poetry

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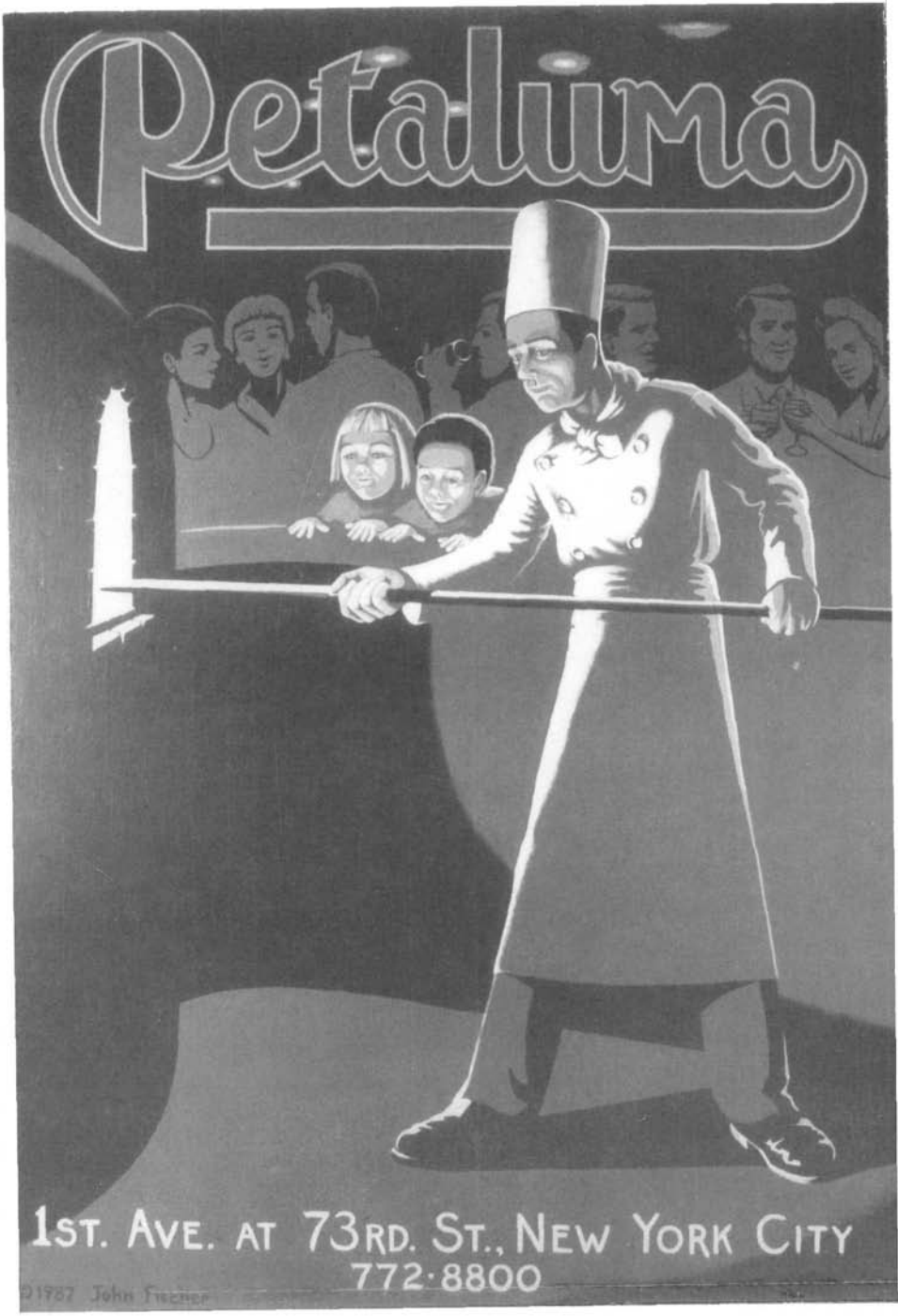

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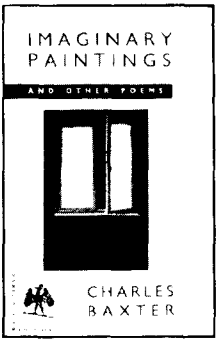

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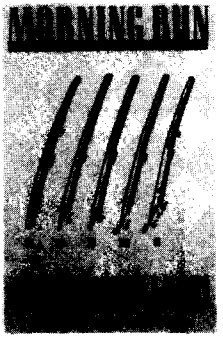

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Volume I, Number I
Fall, 1989

THE VIEW FROM ALGONQUIN

Short musings on books, authors, and publishing, prepared from time to time by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill

On "regional publishing," local talent... and literature that transcends geography

We were pleased to accept, some time back, a citation from the Ernest Hemingway Foundation for Kaye Gibbons' first novel, *Ellen Foster*—but were slightly bemused by the language:

> "In honoring *Ellen Foster*, we also pay tribute to the small regional presses now flourishing throughout this country..."

Not to seem ungrateful, and we do appreciate the kind words, but—Algonquin may be small, but we are not a regional press any more than Random House or Doubleday are regional presses because they are located in New York City.

The idea that our books are written for people in a specific area is absurd. Take Mississippian Larry Brown's new novel, *Dirty Work*, for example. Written fifty years after Dalton Trumbo's famous antiwar novel *Johnny Got His Gun*, *Dirty Work* bears comparison on many levels, for the same issues are at stake: war and peace, life and death, love. And while Brown's approach is as different from Trumbo's as the eighties are from the thirties, his novel achieves the same kind of universal power, delivers the same shocking recognition of human loss. What, then, is so all-fired "regional" about that?

Having said all that, it occurs to us that we *do* publish more than our share of outstanding Southern writers, especially in *New Stories from the South*.

The Algonquin Literary Quiz

Identify the sport played by the following fictional characters, and the book in which each appears: (a) Rabbit Angstrom; (b) The Citizen; (c) Labove; (d) Jordan Baker. *Answers, inverted, at bottom of page.*

Uncle Maxwell's Publishing Clinic

Uncle Maxwell will endeavor to answer your questions about publishing and related subjects.

Q. *Why do books cost so much these days? Several decades ago, books cost $3, $4, and $5. You'd think that with computerized typesetting and photoprinting, books could be printed more economically. It is getting so that I cannot afford to buy anything but paperback books.*
—N.L., New York, NY

A. The envelope in which you enclosed your letter has a 25¢ postage stamp on it. Back in the Good Old Days, the same letter would have taken a 3¢ stamp. Does that answer your question?

TO BE CONTINUED...

Address correspondence, if any, to Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, Post Office Box 2225, Chapel Hill, N.C. 27515-2225

(a) Basketball, Updike, *Rabbit, Run*; (b) Shotput, Joyce, *Ulysses*; (c) Football, Faulkner, *The Hamlet*; (d) Golf, Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*.

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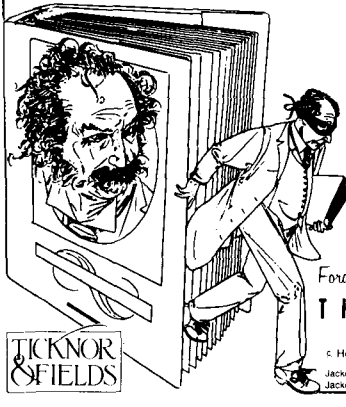

STOLEN WORDS

Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism

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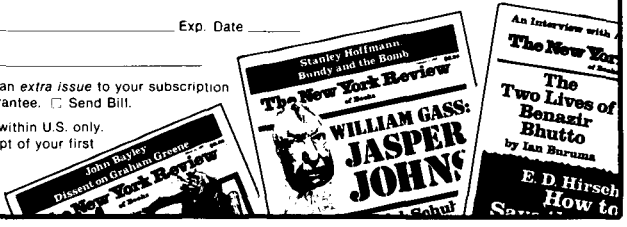

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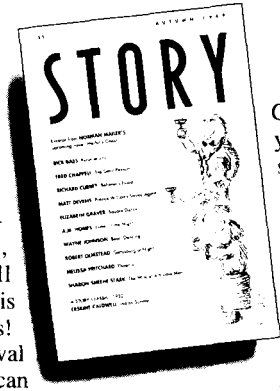

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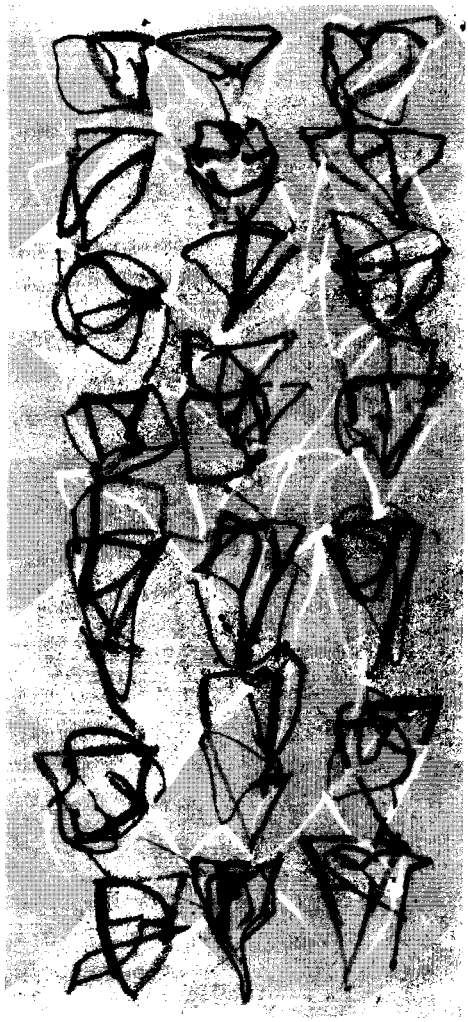

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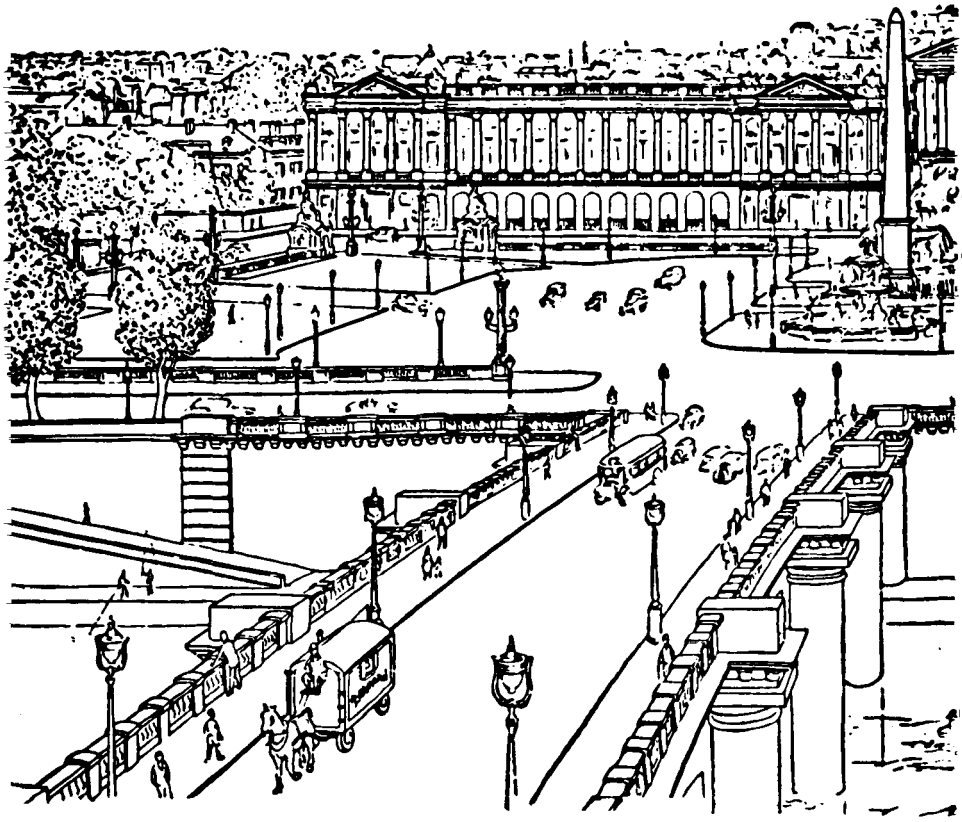

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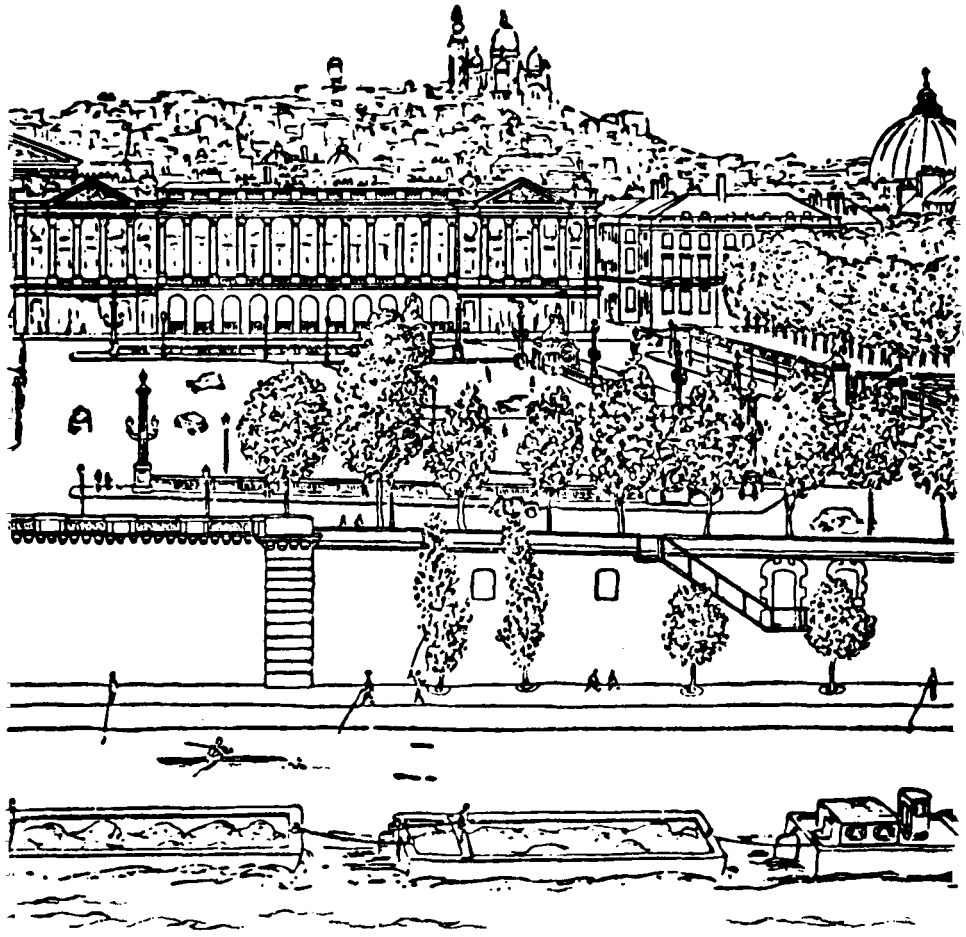

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from The Book of Evidence

by John Banville

Stand up, please, place your hand here, state your name clearly. Frederick Charles St. John Vanderveld Montgomery. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth? Don't make me laugh.

My Lord, when you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say. I am kept locked up here like some exotic animal, last survivor of a species they had thought extinct. They should let in people to view me, the girl-eater, svelte and dangerous, padding to and fro in my cage, my terrible green glance flickering past the bars, give them something to dream about, tucked up cosy in their beds of a night. After my capture they clawed at each other to get a look at me. They would have paid money for the privilege, I believe. They shouted abuse, and shook their fists at me, showing their teeth. It was unreal, somehow, frightening yet comic, the sight of them there, milling on the pavement like film extras, young men in cheap raincoats, and women with shopping bags, and one or two silent, grizzled characters who just stood, fixed on me hungrily, haggard with envy. Then a guard threw a blanket over my head and bundled me into a squad car. I laughed.

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There was something irrestibly funny in the way reality, banal as ever, was fulfilling my worst fantasies.

By the way, that blanket. Did they bring it specially, or do they always keep one handy in the boot? Such questions trouble me now, I brood on them. What an interesting figure I must have cut, glimpsed there, sitting up in the back like a sort of mummy, as the car sped through the wet, sunlit streets, bleating importantly.

Then this place. It was the noise that impressed me first of all. A terrible racket, yells and whistles, hoots of laughter, arguments, sobs. But there are moments of stillness, too, as if a great fear, or a great sadness, has fallen suddenly, striking us all speechless. The air stands motionless in the corridors, like stagnant water. It is laced with a faint stink of carbolic, which bespeaks the charnel-house. In the beginning I fancied it was me, I mean I thought this smell was mine, my contribution. Perhaps it is? The daylight too is strange, even outside, in the yard, as if something has happened to it, as if something has been done to it, before it is allowed to reach us. It has an acid, lemony cast, and comes in two intensities: either it is not enough to see by or it sears the sight. Of the various kinds of darkness I shall not speak.

My cell. My cell is. Why go on with this.

I stood by the window, in my parents' bedroom. Yes, I had realised that it was, used to be, theirs. The grey dawn was giving way to a pale wash of sunlight. My lips were tacky from last night's port. The room, the house, the garden and the fields, all was strange to me, I did not recognise it today—strange, and yet known, too, like a place in—yes—in a dream. I stood there in my wrinkled suit, with my aching head and soiled mouth, wide-eyed but not quite awake, staring fixedly into that patch of sunlit garden with an amnesiac's numbed amazement. But then, am I not always like that, more or less? When I think about it, I seem to have lived most of my life that way, stalled between sleep and waking, unable to distinguish between dream and the daylight world. In my mind there are places, moments, events, which are so still, so isolated,

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that I am not sure they can be real, but which if I had recalled them that morning would have struck me with more vividness and force than the real things surrounding me. For instance, there is the hallway of a farmhouse where I went once as a child to buy apples. I see the polished stone floor, cardinal red. I can smell the polish. There is a gnarled geranium in a pot, and a big pendulum clock with the minute-hand missing. I can hear the farmer's wife speaking in the dim depths of the house, asking something of someone. I can sense the fields all around, the light above the fields, the vast, slow, late-summer day. I am there. In such remembered moments I am there as I never was at Coolgrange, as I seem never to have been, or to be, anywhere, at any time, as I, or some essential part of me, was not there even on that day I am remembering, the day I went to buy apples from the farmer's wife, at that farm in the midst of the fields. Never wholly anywhere, never with anyone, either, that was me, always. Even as a child I seemed to myself a traveller who had been delayed in the middle of an urgent journey. Life was an unconscionable wait, walking up and down the platform, watching for the train. People got in the way and blocked my view, I had to crane to see past them. Yes, that was me, all right.

I picked my way down through the silent house to the kitchen. In the morning light the room had a scrubbed, eager aspect. I moved around warily, unwilling to disturb the atmosphere of hushed expectancy, feeling like an uninitiate at some grand, rapt ceremony of light and weather. The dog lay on a dirty old rug beside the stove, its muzzle between its paws, watching me, a crescent of white showing in each eye. I made a pot of tea, and was sitting at the table, waiting for it to draw, when Joanne came in. She was wearing a mouse-grey dressing-gown belted tightly about her midriff. Her hair was tied up at the back in a thick, appropriately equine plume. It really was remarkable in colour, a vernal russet blaze. Immediately, and not for the first time, I found myself picturing how she must be flossed elsewhere, and then was ashamed, as if I had misused the poor child. Seeing me, she halted, of course, ready to bolt. I lifted the teapot in a friendly gesture

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and invited her to join me. She shut the door and edged around me with a panic-stricken smile, keeping the table between us, and took down a cup and saucer from the dresser. She had red heels and very white, thick calves. I thought she must be about seventeen. Through the fog of my hangover it occurred to me that she would be bound to know something about the state of my mother's finances—whether, for instance, those ponies were making money. I gave her what was intended to be a boyish, encouraging smile, though I suspect it came out a broken leer, and told her to sit down, that we must have a chat. The tea, however, was not for her, but for my mother—for Dolly, she said. Well! I thought, Dolly, no less! She made off at once, with the saucer grasped in both hands and her agitated smile fixed on the trembling liquid in the cup.

When she was gone I poked about morosely for a while, looking for the papers that had been on the table yesterday, the bills and ledgers and chequebook stubs, but found nothing. A drawer of the little bureau from my father's study was locked. I considered forcing it open, but restrained myself: in my hungover mood I might have smashed the whole thing to bits.

I wandered off through the house, carrying my teacup with me. In the drawing-room the carpet had been taken up, and a pane of glass in one of the windows was broken, and there was glass on the floor. I noticed I had no shoes on. I opened the garden door and stepped outside in my socks. There was a smell of sun-warmed grass and a faint tang of dung in the rinsed, silky air. The black shadow of the house lay across the lawn like a fallen stage-flat. I ventured a step or two on the yielding turf, the dew seeping up between my toes. I felt like an old man, going along shakily with my cup and saucer rattling and my trouser-cuffs wet and crumpled around my ankles. The rosebeds under the window had not been tended for years, and a tangle of briars rioted at the sills. The faded roses hung in clusters, heavy as cloth. Their particular wan shade of pink, and the chiaroscuro of the scene in general, put me in mind of something. I halted, frowning. The pictures—of

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course. I went back into the drawing-room. Yes, the walls were empty, with here and there a square patch where the wallpaper was not as faded as elsewhere. Surely she hadn't—? I put my cup down carefully on the mantelpiece, taking slow, deep breaths. The bitch! I said aloud, I bet she has! My feet had left wet, webbed prints behind me on the floorboards.

I went through room after room, scanning the walls. Then I tackled the upstairs. But I knew there would be nothing. I stood on the first-floor landing, cursing under my breath. There were voices nearby. I flung open a bedroom door. My mother and Joanne were sitting up side by side in the girl's big bed. They looked at me in mild astonishment, and for a moment I faltered as something brushed past my consciousness, a wingbeat of incredulous speculation. My mother wore a knitted yellow bed-jacket with bobbles and tiny satin bows, which made her look like a monstrously overgrown Easter chick. Where, I said, with a calm that surprised me, where are the pictures, pray? There followed a bit of comic patter, with my mother saying *What? What?* and I shouting *The pictures! The pictures, damn it!* In the end we both had to shut up. The girl had been watching us, turning her eyes slowly from one to the other of us, like a spectator at a tennis match. Now she put a hand over her mouth and laughed. I stared at her, and she blushed. There was a brief silence. I will see you downstairs, mother, I said, in a voice so stiff with ice it fairly creaked.

As I was going away from the door I thought I heard them both sniggering.

My mother arrived in the kitchen barefoot. The sight of her bunions and her big yellow toenails annoyed me. She had wrapped herself in an impossible, shot-silk tea-gown. She had the florid look of one of Lautrec's ruined doxies. I tried not to show too much of the disgust I felt. She pottered about with a show of unconcern, ignoring me. Well? I said, but she only raised her eyebrows blandly and said, Well what? She was almost smirking. That did it. I shouted, I waved my fists, I stamped about stiff-legged, beside myself. Where were they, the pictures, I cried, what had she done with them? I *demanded* to know. They were mine, my inheritance, my

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future and my son's future. And so on. My anger, my sense of outrage, impressed me. I was moved. I might almost have shed tears, I felt so sorry for myself. She let me go on like this for a while, standing with a hand on her hip and her head thrown back, contemplating me with sardonic calm. Then, when I paused to take a breath, she started. Demand, did I?—I, who had gone off and abandoned my widowed mother, who had skipped off to America and married without even informing her, who had never once brought my child, her grandson, to see her—I, who for ten years had stravaiged the world like a tinker, never doing a hand's turn of work, living off my dead father's few pounds and bleeding the estate dry—what right, she shrilled, what right had I to demand anything here? She stopped, and waited, as if really expecting an answer. I fell back a pace. I had forgotten what she is like when she gets going. Then I gathered myself and launched at her again. She rose magnificently to meet me. It was just like the old days. Hammer and tongs, oh, hammer and tongs! So stirring was it that even the dog joined in, barking and whining and dancing up and down on its front paws, until my mother gave it a clout and roared at it to lie down. I called her a bitch and she called me a bastard. I said if I was a bastard what did that make her, and quick as a flash she said, If I'm a bitch what does that make *you*, you cur! Oh, it was grand, a grand match. We were like furious children—no, not children, but big, maddened, primitive creatures—mastodons, something like that—tearing and thrashing in a jungle clearing amidst a storm of whipping lianas and uprooted vegetation. The air throbbed between us, blood-dimmed and thick. There was a sense of things ranged around us, small creatures cowering in the undergrowth, watching us in a trance of terror and awe. At last, sated, we disengaged tusks and turned aside. I nursed my pounding head in my hands. She stood at the sink, holding on to one of the taps and looking out the window at the garden, her chest heaving. We could hear ourselves breathe. The upstairs lavatory flushed, a muted, tentative noise, as if the girl were tactfully reminding us of her presence in the house. My mother sighed. She had sold the pictures to Binkie

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Behrens. I nodded to myself. Behrens: of course. All of them? I said. She did not answer. Time passed. She sighed again. You got the money, she said, what there was of it—he left me only debts. Suddenly she laughed. I should have known better, she said, than to marry a mick. She looked at me over her shoulder and shrugged. Now it was my turn to sigh. Dear me, I said. Oh, dear me.

You're not getting into one of your moods, are you, Freddie? my mother said.

Have I mentioned my bad moods, I wonder. Very black, very black. As if the world had grown suddenly dim, as if something had dirtied the air. Even when I was a child my depressions frightened people. In them again, is he? they would say, and they would chuckle, but uneasily, and edge away from me. In school I was a terror—but no, no, I'll spare you the schooldays. You won't want us to withdraw, will you? she said, with that grin.

He died at evening. The room was still heavy with the long day's heat. I sat on a chair beside his bed in the open window and held his hand. His hand. The waxen feel of. How bright the air above the trees, bright and blue, like the limitless skies of childhood. I put an arm around him, laid a hand on his forehead. He said to me: don't mind her. He said to me—

Stop this, stop it. I was not there. I have not been present at anyone's death. He died alone, slipped away while no one was looking, leaving us to our own devices. By the time I arrived from the city they had trussed him up, ready for the coffin.

I woke with a dreadful start, my ears ringing, as if there had been an explosion in my head. A dream: something about meat. It was light, but whether it was dawn or still dusk I was not sure. Grey. Nor did I know where I was. Even when I realised it was Coolgrange I did not recognise the room at first. Very high and long, with lofty windows that came down to the floor. Shabby, too, in a peculiar, offended way, as if it were conscious of once having been an important place. I got up carefully from the bed and went and looked down at the lawn. The

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grass was grey, and there were pigeon-coloured shadows under the trees. My brain thudded. It must be dawn: in the oak wood, under an iron sky, a solitary bird was testing out the lightening air with a single repeated flute-note. I pressed my forehead against the window-pane, and shivered at the clammy, cold touch of the glass. I had been travelling for the best part of a week, with scant food and too much alcohol, and now it was all catching up with me. I felt sick, sodden, reamed. My eyelids were scalding, my spit tasted of ash. It seemed to me the garden was watching me, in its stealthy, tight-lipped way, or that it was at least somehow aware of me, framed here in the window. . . .

The dream. (The court will need to hear about my dreams.) It came back to me suddenly. Nothing very much happened in it. My dreams are not the riotous tumble of events that others claim to enjoy, but states of feeling, rather, moods, particular humours, gusts of emotion, accompanied often by extreme physical effects: I weep, or thrash my limbs, grind my teeth, laugh, cry out. On this occasion it had been a dry retching, the ache in my throat when I woke was what brought it back to me. I had dreamed I was gnawing the ripped-out sternum of some creature, possibly human. It seemed to have been parboiled, for the meat on it was soft and white. Barely warm now, it crumbled in my mouth like suet, making me gag. Believe me, your lordship, I do not enjoy relating these things any more than the court enjoys hearing them. And there is worse to come, as you know. Anyway, there I was mumbling these frightful gobs of flesh, my stomach heaving even as I slept. That is all there was, really, except for an underlying sensation of enforced yet horribly pleasurable transgression. Wait a moment. I want to get this right, it is important, I'm not sure why. Some nameless authority was making me do this terrible thing, was standing over me implacably with folded arms as I sucked and slobbered, yet despite this—or perhaps, even, because of it—despite the horror, too, and the nausea—deep inside me something exulted.

By the way, leafing through my dictionary I am struck by the poverty of the language when it comes to naming or

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describing badness. Evil, wickedness, mischief, these words imply an agency, the conscious or at least active doing of wrong. They do not signify the bad in its inert, neutral, self-sustaining state. Then there are the adjectives: dreadful, heinous, execrable, vile, and so on. They are not so much descriptive as judgmental. They carry a weight of censure mingled with fear. Is this not a queer state of affairs? It makes me wonder. I ask myself if perhaps the thing itself—*badness*—does not exist at all, if these strangely vague and imprecise words are only a kind of ruse, a kind of elaborate cover for the fact that nothing is there. Or perhaps the words are an attempt to make it be there? Or, again, perhaps there is something, but the words invented it. Such considerations make me feel dizzy, as if a hole had opened briefly in the world. What was I talking about? My dreams, yes. There was the recurring one, the one in which—but no, no, leave that to another time.

Maolseachlainn Mac Giolla Gunna, my counsel and, he insists, my friend, has a trick of seizing on the apparently trivial in the elaboration of his cases. Anecdotes of his methods circulate in the corridors of the chancery, and around the catwalks in here. Details, details are his obsession. He is a large, lumbering, unhandy man—yards, literally yards of pinstripe—with a big square head and raggedy hair and tiny, haunted eyes. I think a life spent poking in the crevices of other people's nasty little tragedies has damaged something in him. He exudes an air of injured longing. They say he is a terror in court, but when he sits at the scarred table in the counsel room here, with his half-glasses hooked on that big head, crouched over his papers and writing out notes in a laborious, minute hand, panting a little and muttering to himself, I am reminded irresistibly of a certain fat boy from my schooldays, who was disconsolately in love with me, and whom I used to get to do my homework for me.

At present Maolseachlainn is deeply interested in why I went to Whitewater in the first place. But why should I not have gone there? I knew the Behrenses—or God knows I knew Anna, anyway. I had been away for ten years, I was paying a social

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call, as a friend of the family. This, however, is not good enough, it seems. Maolseachlainn frowns, slowly shaking his great head, and without realising it goes into his court routine. Is it not true that I left my mother's house in anger only a day after my arrival there? Is it not the case that I was in a state of high indignation because I had heard my father's collection of pictures had been sold to Helmut Behrens for what I considered a paltry sum? And is it not further the case that I had reason already to feel resentment against the man Behrens, who had attempted to cuckold my father in—But hold on there, old man, I said: that last bit only came to light later on. He always looks so crestfallen when I stop him in his tracks like this. All the same, facts are facts.

It is true, I did fight with my mother again, I did storm out of the house (with the dog after me, of course, trying to bite my heels). However, Binkie Behrens was not the cause of the row, or not directly, anyway. As far as I remember it was the same old squabble: money, betrayal, my going to the States, my leaving the States, my marriage, my abandoned career, all that, the usual—and, yes, the fact that she had flogged my birthright for the price of a string of plug-ugly ponies out of which she had imagined she would make a fortune to provide for herself in the decrepitude of her old age, the deluded bloody bitch. There was as well the business of the girl Joanne. As I was leaving I paused and said, measuring my words, that I thought it hardly appropriate for a woman of my mother's position in society—her position!—in society!—to be so chummy with a stable-girl. I confess I had intended to cause outrage, but I am afraid I was the one who ended up goggle-eyed. My mother, after a moment's silence, stared me straight in the face, with brazen insouciance, and said that Joanne was not a child, that she was in fact twenty-seven years of age. She is—with a pause here for effect—she is like a son to me, the son I never had. Well, I said, swallowing hard, I'm happy for you both, I'm sure! and flounced out of the house. On the drive, though, I had to stop and wait for my indignation and resentment to subside a little before I could get my breath back. Sometimes I think I am an utter sentimentalist.

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I got to Whitewater that evening. The last leg of the journey I made by taxi from the village. The driver was an immensely tall, emaciated man in a flat cap and an antique, blue-flannel suit. He studied me with interest in the driving-mirror, hardly bothering to watch the road ahead of us. I tried staring back at him balefully, but he was unabashed, and only grinned a little on one side of his thin face with a peculiarly friendly air of knowing. Why do I remember people like this so vividly? They clutter my mind, when I look up from the page they are thronged around me in the shadows, silent, mildly curious—even, it might be, solicitous. They are witnesses, I suppose, the innocent bystanders who have come, without malice, to testify against me.

I can never approach Whitewater without a small, involuntary gasp of admiration. The drive leads up from the road in a long, deep, treeless curve, so that the house seems to turn, slowly, dreamily, opening wide its Palladian colonnades. The taxi drew to a stop on the gravel below the great front steps, and with the sudden silence came the realisation—yes, Maolseachlainn, I admit it—that I had no reasonable cause to be there. I sat for a moment looking about me in groggy consternation, like a wakened sleep-walker, but the driver was watching me in the mirror now with rapt expectancy, and I had to pretend to know what I was about. I got out of the car and stood patting my pockets and frowning importantly, but I could not fool him, his lopsided grin grew slyer still, for a second I thought he was going to wink at me. I told him brusquely to wait, and mounted the steps pursued by an unshakeable sensation of general mockery.

After a long time the door was opened by a wizened little angry man in what appeared at first to be a bus conductor's uniform. A few long strands of very black hair were plastered across his skull like streaks of boot polish. He looked at me with deep disgust. Not open today, he said, and was starting to shut the door in my face when I stepped smartly past him into the hall. I gazed about me, rubbing my hands slowly and smiling, playing the returned expatriate. Ah, I said, the old place! The great Tintoretto on the stairs, swarming with angels

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and mad-eyed martyrs, blared at me its vast chromatic chord. The doorman or whatever he was danced about anxiously behind me. I turned and loomed at him, still grinning, and said no, I wasn't a tripper, but a friend of the family—was Miss Behrens at home, by any chance? He dithered, distrustful still, then told me to wait, and scuttled off down the hall, splaying one flat foot as he went and carefully smoothing the oiled hairs on his pate.

I waited. All was silent save for the ticking of a tall, seventeenth-century German clock. On the wall beside me there was a set of six exquisite little Bonington water-colours, I could have put a couple of them under my arm there and then and walked out. The clock took a laboured breath and pinged the half-hour, and then, all about me, in farther and farther rooms, other clocks too let fall their single, silvery chimes, and it was as if a tiny tremor had passed through the house. I looked again at the Tintoretto. There was a Fragonard, too, and a Watteau. And this was only the hallway. What was going on, what had happened, that it was all left unattended like this? I heard the taximan outside sounding his horn, a tentative apologetic little toot. He must have thought I had forgotten about him. (I had.) Somewhere at the back of the house a door banged shut, and a second later a breath of cool air brushed past my face. I advanced creakingly along the hall, a hot, almost sensuous thrill of apprehensiveness pulsing behind my breastbone. I am at heart a timid man, large deserted places make me nervous. One of the figures in the Fragonard, a silken lady with blue eyes and a plump lower lip, was watching me sidelong with what seemed an expression of appalled but lively speculation. Cautiously I opened a door. The fat knob turned under my hand with a wonderful, confiding smoothness. I entered a long, high, narrow, many-windowed garden room. The wallpaper was the colour of tarnished gold. The air was golden too, suffused with the heavy soft light of evening. I felt as if I had stepped straight into the eighteenth century. The furnishings were sparse, there were no more than five or six pieces—some delicate, lyre-backed chairs, an ornate sideboard, a small ormolu table—placed just so, in such

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a way that not the things but the space around them, the light itself, seemed arranged. I stood quite still, listening, I did not know for what. On the low table there was a large and complicated jigsaw puzzle, half-assembled. Some of the pieces had fallen to the floor. I gazed at them, sprinkled on the parquet like puddles of something that had spilled, and once again a faint shiver seemed to pass through the house. At the far end of the room a french window stood wide-open, and a gauze curtain billowed in the breeze. Outside there was a long slope of lawn, whereon, in the middle distance, a lone, heraldic horse was prancing. Farther off was the river bend, the water whitening in the shallows, and beyond that there were trees, and then vague mountains, and then the limitless, gilded blue of summer. It struck me that the perspective of this scene was wrong somehow. Things seemed not to recede as they should, but to be arrayed before me — the furniture, the open window, the lawn and river and far-off mountains — as if they were not being looked at but were themselves looking, intent upon a vanishing-point here, inside the room. I turned then, and saw myself turning as I turned, as I seem to myself to be turning still, as I sometimes imagine I shall be turning always, as if this might be my punishment, my damnation, just this breathless, blurred, eternal turning towards her.

You have seen the picture in the papers, you know what she looks like. A youngish woman in a black dress with a broad white collar, standing with her hands folded in front of her, one gloved, the other hidden except for the fingers, which are flexed, ringless. She is wearing something on her head, a cap or clasp of some sort, which holds her hair drawn tightly back from her brow. Her prominent black eyes have a faintly oriental slant. The nose is large, the lips full. She is not beautiful. In her right hand she holds a folded fan, or it might be a book. She is standing in what I take to be the lighted doorway of a room. Part of a couch can be seen, or maybe a bed, with a brocade cover. The darkness behind her is dense and yet mysteriously weightless. Her gaze is calm, inexpectant, though there is a trace of challenge, of hostility, even, in the set of her mouth. She does not want to be here, and yet cannot be

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elsewhere. The gold brooch that secures the wings of her wide collar is expensive and ugly. All this you have seen, all this you know. Yet I put it to you, gentle connoisseurs of the jury, that even knowing all this you still know nothing, next to nothing. You do not know the fortitude and pathos of her presence. You have not come upon her suddenly in a golden room on a summer eve, as I have. You have not held her in your arms, you have not seen her asprawl in a ditch. You have not—ah no!—you have not killed for her.

I stood there, staring, for what seemed a long time, and gradually a kind of embarrassment took hold of me, a hot, shamefaced awareness of myself, as if somehow I, this soiled sack of flesh, were the one who was being scrutinised, with careful, cold attention. It was not just the woman's painted stare that watched me. Everything in the picture, that brooch, those gloves, the flocculent darkness at her back, every spot on the canvas was an eye fixed on me unblinkingly. I retreated a pace, faintly aghast. The silence was fraying at the edges. I heard cows lowing, a car starting up. I remembered the taxi, and turned to go. A maid was standing in the open french window. She must have come in just then and seen me there and started back in alarm. Her eyes were wide, and one knee was flexed and one hand lifted, as if to ward off a blow. For a moment neither of us stirred. Behind her a sudden breeze burnished the grassy slope. We did not speak. Then slowly, with her hand still raised, she stepped backwards carefully through the window, teetering a little as her heels blindly sought the level of the paved pathway outside. I felt an inexplicable, brief rush of annoyance—a presentiment, perhaps, a stray zephyr sent ahead of the storm that was to come. A telephone was ringing somewhere. I turned quickly and left the room.

There was no one in the hall. The telephone rang and rang, with peevish insistence. I could still hear it going as I descended the front steps. The taxi had left, of course. I swore, and set off down the drive, hobbling over the stony ground in my thin-soled Spanish shoes. The low sun glared in my face. When I looked back at the house the windows were ablaze,

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and seemed to be laughing fatly in derision. I began to perspire, and that brought on the midges. I asked myself again what had possessed me to come to Whitewater. I knew the answer, of course. It was the smell of money that had attracted me, as the smell of sweat was attracting these damned flies. I saw myself, as if from one of those sunstruck windows, skulking along here in the dust, hot, disgruntled, overweight, head bowed and fat back bent, my white suit rucked at the armpits and sagging in the arse, a figure of fun, the punchline of a bad joke, and at once I was awash with self-pity. Christ! was there no one who would help me? I halted, and cast a troubled glance around me, as if there might be a benefactor lurking among the trees. The silence had a sense of muffled gloating. I plunged on again, and heard the sound of engines, and presently an enormous black limousine came around the bend, followed by a sleek red sportscar. They were going at a stately pace, the limousine bouncing gently on its springs, and for a second I thought it was a funeral. I stepped on to the grass verge but kept on walking. The driver of the limousine, a large, crop-headed man, sat erect and vigilant, his hands lightly cupped on the rim of the steering-wheel, as if it were a projectile he might pluck from its moorings and throw with deadly aim. Beside him there was a stooped, shrunken figure; as the car swished past I glimpsed a dark eye and a liver-spotted skull, and huge hands resting one upon the other on the crook of a stick. A blonde woman wearing dark glasses was driving the sportscar. We gazed at each other with blank interest, like strangers, as she went by. I recognised her, of course.

Ten minutes later I was trudging along the road with my thumb stuck out when I heard her pull up behind me. I knew it would be she. I stopped, turned. She remained in the car, her wrists folded before her on the steering-wheel. There was a brief, wordless tussle to see which one of us would make the first move. We compromised. I walked back to the car and she got out to meet me. I *thought* it was you, she said. We smiled, and were silent. She wore a cream suit and a white blouse. There was blood on her shoes. Her hair was yellower than I remembered, I wondered if she was dyeing it now. I told her

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she looked marvellous. I meant it, but the words sounded hollow, and I blushed. Anna, I said. I remembered, with a soft shock, how one day long ago I stole the envelope of one of her letters to my wife, Daphne, and took it into the lavatory and pried open the flap, my heart pounding, so that I might lick the gum where she had licked. The thought came to me: I loved her! and I gave a sort of wild, astonished laugh. She took off her sunglasses and looked at me quizzically. My hands were trembling. Come and see father, she said, he needs cheering up.

She drove very fast, working the controls probingly, as if she were trying to locate a pattern, a secret formula, hidden in this mesh of small, deft actions. I was impressed, even a little cowed. She was full of the impatient assurance of the rich. We did not speak. In a moment we were at the house, and pulled up in a spray of gravel. She opened her door, then paused and looked at me for a moment in silence and shook her head. Freddie Montgomery, she said. Well!

As we went up the steps to the front door she linked her arm lightly in mine. I was surprised. When I knew her, all those years ago, she was not one for easy intimacies—intimacies, yes, but not easy ones. She laughed and said, God, I'm a little drunk, I think. She had been to the hospital in the city—Behrens had suffered some sort of mild attack. The hospital was in an uproar. A bomb had gone off in a car in a crowded shopping street, quite a small device, apparently, but remarkably effective. She had wandered unchallenged into the casualty ward. There were bodies lying everywhere. She walked among the dead and dying, feeling like a survivor herself. Good God, Anna, I said. She gave a tense little laugh. What an experience, she said—luckily Flynn keeps a flask of something in the glove compartment. She had taken a few good swigs, and was beginning to regret it now.

We went into the house. The uniformed doorman was nowhere to be seen. I told Anna how he had gone off and left me to wander at will about the place. She shrugged. She supposed everyone had been downstairs watching the news of the bombing on television. All the same, I said, anyone could have

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got in. Why, she asked, do you think someone might come and plant a bomb here? And she looked at me with a peculiar, bitter smile.

She led the way into the gold salon. The french window was still open. There was no sign of the maid. A sort of shyness made me keep my eyes averted from the other end of the room, where the picture leaned out a little from the wall, as if listening intently. I sat down gingerly on one of the Louis Quinze chairs while Anna opened the carved and curlicued sideboard and poured out two whopping measures of gin. There was no ice, and the tonic was flat, but I didn't care, I needed a drink. I was still breathless with the notion of having been in love with her. I felt excited and bemused, and ridiculously pleased, like a child who has been given something precious to play with. I said it to myself—*I loved her!*—trying it out for the sound of it. The thought, lofty, grand, and slightly mad, fitted well with the surroundings. She was pacing between me and the window, clutching her glass tightly in both hands. The gauze curtain bellied lazily at the edge of my vision. Something in the air itself seemed to be shaking. Suddenly the telephone on the low table beside me sprang to life with a crashing noise. Anna snatched it up and cried yes, yes, what? She laughed. It's some taximan, she said to me, looking for his fare. I took the phone and spoke harshly to the fellow. She watched me intently, with a kind of avid amusement. When I put down the receiver she said gaily, Oh, Freddie, you've got so pompous! I frowned. I was not sure how to respond. Her laughter, her glazed stare, were tinged with hysteria. But then, I too was less than calm. Look at that, she said. She was peering in annoyance at her bloodstained shoes. She clicked her tongue, and putting down her glass she quickly left the room. I waited. All this had happened before. I went and stood in the open window, a hand in my pocket, swigging my gin. Pompous, indeed—what did she mean? The sun was almost down, the light was gathering in bundles above the river. I stepped out on to the terrace. A balm of soft air breathed on my face. I thought how strange it was to be here like this, glass in hand, in the silence and calm of a summer evening,

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while there was so much darkness in my heart. I turned and looked up at the house. It seemed to be flying swiftly against the sky. I wanted my share of this richness, this gilded case. From the depths of the room a pair of eyes looked out, dark, calm, unseeing.

Flynn, the crop-headed chauffeur, approached me from the side of the house with an air of tight-lipped politeness which was somehow menacing, rolling on the balls of his disproportionately dainty feet. He sported a bandit's drooping blue-black moustache, trimmed close and squared off at the ends, so that it looked as if it had been painted on to his large, pasty face. I do not like moustaches, have I mentioned that? There is something lewd about them which repels me. I have no doubt the prison shrink could explain what such an aversion signifies—and I've no doubt, too, that in my case he would be wrong. Flynn's was a particularly offensive specimen. The sight of it gave me heart suddenly, cheered me up, I don't know why. I followed him eagerly into the house. The dining-room was a great dim cavern full of the glint and gleam of precious things. Behrens came in leaning on Anna's arm, a tall, delicate figure in rich tweeds and a bow-tie. He moved slowly, measuring his steps. His head, trembling a little, was smooth and steeply domed, like a marvellous, desiccated egg. It must have been twenty years since I had seen him last. I confess I was greatly taken with him now. He had the fine high patina of something lovingly crafted, like one of those exquisite and temptingly pocket-sized jade figurines which I had been eyeing only a moment ago on the mantelpiece. He took my hand and squeezed it slowly in his strangler's grip, looking deep into my eyes as if he were trying to catch a glimpse of someone else in there. Frederick, he said, in his breathy voice. So like your mother.

We dined at a rickety table in the bay of a tall window overlooking the garden. The cutlery was cheap, the plates mismatched. It was something I remembered about Whitewater, the makeshift way that life was lived in odd corners, at the edge of things. The house was not meant for people, all that magnificence would not tolerate their shoddy doings in its

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midst. I watched Behrens cutting up a piece of bleeding meat. Those enormous hands fascinated me. I was always convinced that at some time in the past he had killed someone. I tried to imagine him young, in flannels and a blazer, carrying a tennis racquet—*Oh look, here's Binkie!*—but it was impossible. He talked about the bombing. Five dead—or was it six by now?—from a mere two pounds of explosive! He sighed and shook his head. He seemed more impressed than shocked. Anna hardly spoke. She was pale, and looked tired and distracted. I noticed for the first time how she had aged. The woman I knew fifteen years ago was still there, but fixed inside a coarser outline, like one of Klimt's gem-encrusted lovers. I looked out into the luminous grey twilight, aghast and in an obscure way proud at the thought of what I had lost, of what might have been. Piled clouds, a last, bright strip of sky. A blackbird whistled suddenly. Someday I would lose all this too, I would die, and it would all be gone, this moment at this window, in summer, on the tender brink of night. It was amazing, and yet it was true, it would happen. Anna struck a match and lighted a candle on the table between us, and for a moment there was a sense of hovering, of swaying, in the soft, dark air.

My mother, I said to Behrens, and had to stop and clear my throat—my mother gave you some pictures, I believe. He turned his raptor's gaze on me. *Sold,* he said, and it was almost a whisper, sold, not gave. He smiled. There was a brief silence. He was quite at ease. He was sorry, he said, if I had come in the hope of seeing the pictures again. He could understand that I might be attached to them. But he had got rid of them almost at once. He smiled again, gently. There were one or two quite nice things, he said, but they would not have been comfortable, here, at Whitewater.

There you are, father, I thought, so much for your connoisseur's eye.

I wanted to do something for your mother, you see, Behrens was saying. She had been ill, you know. I gave her much more than the market value—you mustn't tell her that, of course. She wanted to set up in business of some kind, I think. He

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laughed. Such a spirited woman! he said. There was another silence. He fiddled with his knife, amused, waiting. I realised, with some astonishment, that he must have thought I had come to demand the return of the collection. Then, of course, I began to wonder if despite his protestations he had cheated on the price. The notion bucked me up immensely. Why, you old scoundrel, I thought, laughing to myself, you're just like all the rest of us. I looked at Anna's profile faintly reflected in the window before me. What was she, too, but an ageing spinster, with her wrinkles and her dyed hair – probably Flynn serviced her once a month or so, between hosing down the car and taking his moustache to the barber's for a trim. Damn you all! I poured myself a brimming glass of wine, and spilled some on the tablecloth, and was glad. Oh dark, dark.

I expected to be asked to stay the night, but when we had drunk our coffee Anna excused herself, and came back in a minute and said she had phoned for a taxi. I was offended. I had come all this way to see them and they would not even offer me a bed. An ugly silence fell. Behrens at my prompting had been talking about Dutch painters. Did I imagine it, or did he glance at me with a sly smile when he asked if I had been into the garden room? Now he sat, head trembling, his mouth open a little, staring dully at the candle-flame. He lifted a hand, as if he were about to speak again, but let it fall slowly. The lights of a car swept the window and a horn tooted. Behrens did not get up. So good to see you, he murmured, giving me his left hand. So good.

Anna walked with me to the front door. I felt I had somehow made a fool of myself, but could not think how, exactly. In the hall our footsteps sounded very loud, a confused and faintly absurd racket. It's Flynn's night off, Anna said, or I would have had him drive you. I said stiffly that was quite all right. I was asking myself if we could be the same two people who had rolled with Daphne naked on a bed one hot Sunday afternoon on the other side of the world, on the other side of time. How could I have imagined I had ever loved her. Your father seems well, I said. She shrugged. Oh, she said, he's dying. At the door, I don't know what I was thinking of, I

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fumbled for her hand and tried to kiss her. She stepped back quickly, and I almost fell over. The taxi tooted again. Anna! I said, and then could think of nothing to add. She laughed bleakly. Go home, Freddie, she said, with a wan smile, and shut the door slowly in my face.

I knew who would be driving the taxi, of course. Don't say anything, I said to him sternly, not a word! He looked at me in the mirror with a mournful, accusing eye, and we lumbered off down the drive. I realised I had nowhere to go.

Speaking of jaunts: I went to my mother's funeral today. Three plain-clothes men took me in a closed car, I was very impressed. We sped through the city with the siren hee-hawing, it was like my arrest all over again, but in reverse. A lovely, sunny, crisp morning, pale smoke in the air, a few leaves down already on the pavements. I felt such a strange mingling of emotions—a certain rawness, of course, a certain pain, but elation, too, and something like grief that yet was not without sweetness. I was grieving not for my mother only, perhaps not for her at all, but for things in general. Maybe it was just the usual September melancholy, made unfamiliar by the circumstances. We drove by the river under a sky piled high with bundles of luminous Dutch clouds, then south through leafy suburbs. The sea surprised me, as it always does, a bowl of blue, moving metal, light rising in flakes off the surface. All three detectives were chain-smokers, they worked at it grimly, as if it were a part of their duties. One of them offered me a cigarette. Not one of my vices, I said, and they laughed politely. They seemed embarrassed, and kept glancing warily out the windows, as if they had been forced to come on an outing with a famous and disreputable relative and were afraid of being spotted by someone they knew. Now we were in the country, and there was mist on the fields still, and the hedges were drenched. She was buried in the family plot in the old cemetery at Coolgrange. I was not allowed to leave the car, or even to open a window. I was secretly glad, for somehow I could not conceive of myself stepping out suddenly like this, into the world. The driver parked as near as possible to the graveside,

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and I sat in a fog of cigarette smoke and watched the brief, hackneyed little drama unfold beyond the fogged glass, among the leaning headstones. There were few mourners: an aunt or two, and an old man who had worked years ago for my father in the stables. The girl Joanne was there, of course, red-eyed, her poor face blotched and swollen, dressed in a lumpy pullover and a crooked skirt. My mother's good friend Charlie French stood a little apart from the rest, with his hands awkwardly clasped. I was surprised to see him. Decent of him to come, courageous, too. Neither he nor the girl looked in my direction, though they must have felt the pressure of my humid gaze. The coffin seemed to me surprisingly small, they got it down into the hole with room to spare. Poor Ma. I can't believe that she's gone, I mean the fact of it has not sunk in yet. It is somehow as if she had been bundled away to make room for something more important. Of course, the irony of the situation does not escape me: if I had only waited a few months there would have been no need to—but no, enough of that. They'll read the will without me, which is only right. The last time I saw her I fought with her. That was the day I left for Whitewater. She did not visit me in jail. I don't blame her. I never even brought the child for her to see. She was not as tough as I imagined. Did I destroy her life, too? All these dead women.

When the ceremony was over Charlie walked past the car with his head down. He seemed to hesitate, but changed his mind and went on. I think he would have spoken to me, had it not been for the presence of the detectives, and my aunts agog behind him, and, oh, just the general awfulness of everything.

So I am driving away from the village to the Behrens' house in the Humber Hawk, with a foolish grin on my face. I felt, for no good reason, that I was escaping all my problems, I pictured them dwindling in space and time like the village itself, a quaint jumble of things getting steadily smaller and smaller. If I had stopped for a moment to think, of course, I would have realised that what I was leaving behind me was not my tangled

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troubles, as I fondly imagined, but, on the contrary, a mass of evidence, obvious and unmistakable as a swatch of matted hair and blood. I had skipped the inn without paying for my lodgings, I had bought a burglar's kit in the village shop, and now I had as good as stolen a car—and all this not five miles from what would soon come to be known as the scene of the crime. The court will agree, these are hardly the marks of careful premeditation. (Why is it that every other thing I say sounds like the sly preamble to a plea of mitigation?) The fact is, I was not thinking at all, not what could really be called thinking. I was content to sail through sun and shade along these dappled back roads, one hand on the wheel and an elbow out the window, with the scents of the countryside in my nostrils and the breeze whipping my hair. Everything would be well, everything would work itself out. I do not know why I felt so elated, perhaps it was a form of delirium. Anyway, I told myself, it was only a madcap game I was playing, I could call if off whenever I wished.

Meanwhile here was Whitewater, rising above the trees.

An empty tour bus was parked at the gate. The driver's door was open, and the driver was lounging in the stepwell, sunning himself. He watched me as I swung past him into the drive. I waved to him. He wore tinted glasses. He did not smile. He would remember me.

Afterwards the police could not understand why I showed so little circumspection, driving up brazenly like that, in broad daylight, in that unmistakable motor car. But I believed, you see, that the matter would be entirely between Behrens and me, with Anna perhaps as go-between. I never imagined there would be anything so vulgar as a police investigation, and headlines in the papers, and all the rest of it. A simple business transaction between civilised people, that's what I intended. I would be polite but firm, no more than that. I was not thinking in terms of threats and ransom demands, certainly not. When later I read what those reporters wrote—the Midsummer Manhunt, they called it—I could not recognise myself in their depiction of me as a steely, ruthless character. Ruthless—me! No, as I drove up to Whitewater it

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was not police I was thinking of, but only the chauffeur Flynn, with his little pig eyes and his boxer's meaty paws. Yes, Flynn was a man to avoid.

Halfway up the drive there was

God, these tedious details.

Halfway up there was a fork in the drive. A wooden arrow with HOUSE written on it in white paint pointed to the right, while to the left a sign said STRICTLY PRIVATE. I stopped the car. See me there, a big blurred face behind the windscreen peering first this way, then that. It is like an illustration from a cautionary tract: the sinner hesitates at the parting of the ways. I drove off to the left, and my heart gave an apprehensive wallop. Behold, the wretch forsakes the path of righteousness.

I rounded the south wing of the house, and parked on the grass and walked across the lawn to the garden room. The french window was open. Deep breath. It was not yet noon. Far off in the fields somewhere a tractor was working, it made a drowsy, buzzing sound that seemed the very voice of summer, I hear it still, that tiny, distant, prelapsarian song. I had left the rope and the hammer in the car, and brought with me the twine and the roll of wrapping paper. It struck me suddenly how absurd the whole thing was. I began to laugh, and laughing stepped into the room.

The painting is called, as everyone must know by now, *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves*. It measures eighty-two centimetres by sixty-five. From internal evidence—in particular the woman's attire—it has been dated between 1655 and 1660. The black dress and broad white collar and cuffs of the woman are lightened only by a brooch and gold ornamentation on the gloves. The face has a slightly Eastern cast. (I am quoting from the guidebook to Whitewater House.) The picture has been variously attributed to Rembrandt and Frans Hals, even to Vermeer. However, it is safest to regard it as the work of an anonymous master.

None of this means anything.

I have stood in front of other, perhaps greater paintings, and not been moved as I am moved by this one. I have a

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reproduction of it on the wall above my table here—sent to me by, of all people, Anna Behrens—when I look at it my heart contracts. There is something in the way the woman regards me, the querulous, mute insistence of her eyes, which I can neither escape nor assuage. I squirm in the grasp of her gaze. She requires of me some great effort, some tremendous feat of scrutiny and attention, of which I do not think I am capable. It is as if she were asking me to let her live.

She. There is no she, of course. There is only an organisation of shapes and colours. Yet I try to make up a life for her. She is, I will say, thirty-five, thirty-six, though people without thinking still speak of her as a girl. She lives with her father, the merchant (tobacco, spices, and, in secret, slaves). She keeps house for him since her mother's death. She did not like her mother. Her father dotes on her, his only child. She is, he proclaims, his treasure. She devises menus—father has a delicate stomach—inspects the kitchen, she even supervises his wine cellar. She keeps an inventory of the household linen in a little notebook attached to her belt by a fine gold chain, using a code of her own devising, for she has never learned to read or write. She is strict with the servants, and will permit no familiarities. Their dislike she takes for respect. The house is not enough to absorb her energies, she does good works besides: she visits the sick, and is on the board of visitors of the town's almshouse. She is brisk, sometimes impatient, and there are mutterings against her among the alms-folk, especially the old women. At times, usually in spring and at the beginning of winter, everything becomes too much for her. Notice the clammy pallor of her skin: she is prey to obscure ailments. She takes to her bed and lies for days without speaking, hardly breathing, while outside in the silvery northern light the world goes about its busy way. She tries to pray, but God is distant. Her father comes to visit her at evening, walking on tiptoe. These periods of prostration frighten him, he remembers his wife dying, her terrible silence in the last weeks. If he were to lose his daughter too—But she gets up, wills herself to it, and very soon the servants are feeling the edge of her tongue again, and he cannot contain his relief, it

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comes out in little laughs, roguish endearments, a kind of clumsy skittishness. She considers him wryly, then turns back to her tasks. She cannot understand this notion he has got into his head: he wants to have her portrait painted. I'm old, is all he will say to her, I am an old man, look at me! And he laughs, awkwardly, and avoids her eye. My portrait? she says, mine?—I am no fit subject for a painter. He shrugs, at which she is first startled, then grimly amused: he might at least have attempted to contradict her. He seems to realise what is going through her mind, and tries to mend matters, but he becomes flustered, and, watching him fuss and fret and pluck at his cuffs, she realises with a pang that it's true, he has aged. Her father, an old man. The thought has a touch of bleak comedy, which she cannot account for. You have fine hands, he says, growing testy, annoyed both at himself and her, your mother's hands—we'll tell him to make the hands prominent. And so, to humour him, but also because she is secretly curious, she goes along one morning to the studio. The squalor is what strikes her first of all. Dirt and daubs of paint everywhere, gnawed chicken bones on a smeared plate, a chamber-pot on the floor in the corner. The painter matches the place, with that filthy smock, and those fingernails. He has a drinker's squashed and pitted nose. She thinks the general smell is bad until she catches a whiff of his breath. She discovers that she is relieved: she had expected someone young, dissolute, threatening, not this pot-bellied old soak. But then he fixes his little wet eyes on her, briefly, with a kind of impersonal intensity, and she flinches, as if caught in a burst of strong light. No one has ever looked at her like this before. So this is what it is to be known! It is almost indecent. First he puts her standing by the window, but it does not suit, the light is wrong, he says. He shifts her about, grasping her by the upper arms and walking her backwards from one place to another. She feels she should be indignant, but the usual responses do not seem to function here. He is shorter than her by a head. He makes some sketches, scribbles a colour note or two, then tells her to come tomorrow at the same time. And wear a darker dress, he says. Well! She is about to give him a piece of her mind, but

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already he has turned aside to another task. Her maid, sitting by the door, is biting her lips and smirking. She lets the next day pass, and the next, just to show him. When she does return he says nothing about the broken appointment, only looks at her black dress—pure silk, with a broad collar of Spanish lace—and nods carelessly, and she is so vexed at him it surprises her, and she is shocked at herself. He has her stand before the couch. Remove your gloves, he says, I am to emphasise the hands. She hears the note of amused disdain in his voice. She refuses. (*Her* hands, indeed!) He insists. They engage in a brief, stiff little squabble, batting icy politenesses back and forth between them. In the end she consents to remove one glove, then promptly tries to hide the hand she has bared. He sighs, shrugs, but has to suppress a grin, as she notices. Rain streams down the windows, shreds of smoke fly over the rooftops. The sky has a huge silver hole in it. At first she is restless, standing there, then she seems to pass silently through some barrier, and a dreamy calm comes over her. It is the same, day after day, first there is agitation, then the breakthrough, then silence and a kind of softness, as if she were floating away, away, out of herself. He mutters under his breath as he works. He is choleric, he swears, and clicks his tongue, sending up sighs and groans. There are long, fevered passages when he works close up against the canvas, and she can only see his stumpy legs and his old, misshapen boots. Even his feet seem busy. She wants to laugh when he pops his head out at the side of the easel and peers at her sharply, his potato nose twitching. He will not let her see what he is doing, she is not allowed even a peek. Then one day she senses a kind of soundless, settling crash at his end of the room, and he steps back with an expression of weary disgust and waves a hand dismissively at the canvas, and turns aside to clean his brush. She comes forward and looks. For a second she sees nothing, so taken is she by the mere sensation of stopping like this and turning: it is as if—as if somehow she had walked out of herself. A long moment passes. The brooch, she says, is wonderfully done. The sound of her own voice startles her, it is a stranger speaking, and she is cowed. He laughs, not bitterly, but

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with real amusement and, so she feels, a curious sort of sympathy. It is an acknowledgement, of—she does not know what. She looks and looks. She had expected it would be like looking in a mirror, but this is someone she does not recognise, and yet knows. The words come unbidden into her head: Now I know how to die. She puts on her glove, and signals to her maid. The painter is speaking behind her, something about her father, and money, of course, but she is not listening. She is calm. She is happy. She feels numbed, hollowed, a walking shell. She goes down the stairs, along the dingy hall, and steps out into a commonplace world.

Do not be fooled: none of this means anything either.

I had placed the string and the wrapping-paper carefully on the floor, and now stepped forward with my arms outstretched. The door behind me opened and a large woman in a tweed skirt and a cardigan came into the room. She halted when she saw me there, with my arms flung wide before the picture and peering wildly at her over my shoulder, while I tried with one foot to conceal the paper and the ball of twine on the floor. She had blue-grey hair, and her spectacles were attached to a cord around her neck. She frowned. You must stay with the party, she said loudly, in a cross voice—really, I don't know how many times I have to say it. I stepped back. A dozen gaudily dressed people were crowding in the doorway behind her, craning to get a look at me. Sorry, I heard myself say meekly, I got lost. She gave an impatient toss of the head and strode to the middle of the room and began at once to speak in a shouted singsong about Carlin tables and Berthoud clocks, and weeks later, questioned by the police and shown my photograph, she would deny ever having seen me before in her life. Her charges shuffled in, jostling surreptitiously in an effort to stay out of her line of sight. They took up position, standing with their hands clasped before them, as if they were in church, and looked about them with expressions of respectful vacancy. One grizzled old party in a Hawaiian shirt grinned at me and winked. I confess I was rattled. There was a knot in the pit of my stomach and my palms were damp. All the elation I had felt on the way here had evaporated, leaving

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behind it a stark sense of foreboding. I was struck, for the first time, really, by the enormity of what I was embarked on. I felt like a child whose game has led him far into the forest, and now it is nightfall, and there are shadowy figures among the trees. The guide had finished her account of the treasures in the room—the picture, *my* picture, was given two sentences, and a misattribution—and walked out now with one arm raised stiffly above her head, still talking, shepherding the party behind her. When they had gone I waited, staring fixedly at the doorknob, expecting her to come back and haul me out briskly by the scruff of the neck. Somewhere inside me a voice was moaning softly in panic and fright. This is something that does not seem to be appreciated—I have remarked on it before—I mean how timorous I am, how easily daunted. But she did not return, and I heard them tramping away up the stairs. I set to work again feverishly. I see myself, like the villain in an old three-reeler, all twitches and scowls and wriggling eyebrows. I got the picture off the wall, not without difficulty, and laid it flat on the floor—shying away from that black stare—and began to tear off lengths of wrapping-paper. I would not have thought that paper would make so much noise, such scuffling and rattling and ripping, it must have sounded as if some large animal were being flayed alive in here. And it was no good, my hands shook, I was all thumbs, and the sheets of paper kept rolling back on themselves, and I had nothing to cut the twine with, and anyway the picture, with its thick, heavy frame, was much too big to be wrapped. I scampered about on my knees, talking to myself and uttering little squeaks of distress. Everything was going wrong. Give it up, I told myself, oh please, please, give it up now, while there's still time! but another part of me gritted its teeth and said, no you don't, you coward, get up, get on your feet, do it. So I struggled up, moaning and snivelling, and grasped the picture in my arms and staggered with it blindly, nose to nose, in the direction of the french window. Those eyes were staring into mine, I almost blushed. And then—how shall I express it—then somehow I sensed, behind that stare, another presence, watching me. I stopped, and lowered the picture, and

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there she was, standing in the open window, just as she had stood the day before, wide-eyed, with one hand raised. This, I remember thinking bitterly, this is the last straw. I was outraged. How dare the world strew these obstacles in my path. It was not fair, it was just not fair! Right, I said to her, here, take this, and I thrust the painting into her arms and turned her about and marched her ahead of me across the lawn. She said nothing, or if she did I was not listening. She found it hard going on the grass, the picture was too heavy for her, and she could hardly see around it. When she faltered I prodded her between the shoulder-blades. I really was very cross. We reached the car. The cavernous boot smelled strongly of fish. There was the usual jumble of mysterious implements, a jack, and spanners and things—I am not mechanically minded, or handed, have I mentioned that?—and a filthy old pullover, which I hardly noticed at the time, thrown in a corner with deceptive casualness by the hidden arranger of all these things. I took out the tools and threw them behind me on to the grass, then lifted the painting from the maid's arms and placed it face-down on the worn felt matting. This was the first time I had seen the back of the canvas, and suddenly I was struck by the antiquity of the thing. Three hundred years ago it had been stretched and sized and left against a lime-washed wall to dry. I closed my eyes for a second, and at once I saw a workshop in a narrow street in Amsterdam or Antwerp, smoky sunlight in the window, and hawkers going by outside, and the bells of the cathedral ringing. The maid was watching me. She had the most extraordinary pale, violet eyes, they seemed transparent, when I looked into them I felt I was seeing clear through her head. Why did she not run away? Behind her, in one of the great upstairs windows, a dozen heads were crowded, goggling at us. I could make out the guide-woman's glasses and the American's appalling shirt. I think I must have cried aloud in rage, an old lion roaring at the whip and chair, for the maid flinched and stepped back a pace. I caught her wrist in an iron claw and, wrenching open the car door, fairly flung her into the back seat. Oh, why did she not run away! When I got behind the wheel, fumbling and snarling, I

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caught a whiff of something, a faint, sharp, metallic smell, like the smell of worn pennies. I could see her in the mirror, crouched behind me as in a deep glass box, braced between the door and the back of the seat, with her elbows stuck out and fingers splayed and her face thrust forward, like the cornered heroine in a melodrama. A fierce, choking gust of impatience surged up inside me. Impatience, yes, that was what I felt most strongly—that, and a grievous sense of embarrassment. I was mortified. I had never been so exposed in all my life. People were looking at me—she in the back seat, and the tourists up there jostling at the window, but also, it seemed, a host of others, of phantom spectators, who must have been, I suppose, an intimation of all that horde who would soon be crowding around me in fascination and horror. I started the engine. The gears shrieked. In my agitation I kept getting ahead of myself and having to go back and repeat the simplest actions. When I had got the car off the grass and on to the drive I let the clutch out too quickly, and the machine sprang forward in a series of bone-shaking lurches, the bonnet going up and down like the prow of a boat caught in a wash and the shock absorbers grunting. The watchers at the window must have been in fits by now. A bead of sweat ran down my cheek. The sun had made the steering-wheel almost too hot to hold, and there was a blinding glare on the windscreen. The maid was scrabbling at the door handle, I roared at her and she stopped at once, and looked at me wide-eyed, like a rebuked child. Outside the gate the bus driver was still sitting in the sun. When she saw him she tried to get the window open, but in vain, the mechanism must have been broken. She pounded on the glass with her fists. I spun the wheel and the car lumbered out into the road, the tires squealing. We were shouting at each other now, like a married couple having a fight. She pummelled me on the shoulder, got a hand around in front of my face and tried to claw my eyes. Her thumb went up my nose, I thought she would tear off the nostril. The car was going all over the road. I trod with both feet on the brake pedal, and we sailed in a slow, dragging curve into the hedge. She fell back. I turned to her. I had the hammer in my hand. I

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looked at it, startled. The silence rose around us like water. Don't, she said. She was crouched as before, with her arms bent and her back pressed into the corner. I could not speak, I was filled with a kind of wonder. I had never felt another's presence so immediately and with such raw force. I saw her now, really saw her, for the first time, her mousy hair and bad skin, that bruised look around her eyes. She was quite ordinary, and yet, somehow, I don't know—somehow radiant. She cleared her throat and sat up, and detached a strand of hair that had caught at the corner of her mouth.

You must let me go, she said, or you will be in trouble.

It's not easy to wield a hammer in a motor car. When I struck her the first time I expected to feel the sharp, clean smack of steel on bone, but it was more like hitting clay, or hard putty. The word *fontanel* sprang into my mind. I thought one good bash would do it, but, as the autopsy would show, she had a remarkably strong skull—even in that, you see, she was unlucky. The first blow fell just at the hairline, above her left eye. There was not much blood, only a dark-red glistening dent with hair matted in it. She shuddered, but remained sitting upright, swaying a little, looking at me with eyes that would not focus properly. Perhaps I would have stopped then, if she had not suddenly launched herself at me across the back of the seat, flailing and screaming. I was dismayed. How could this be happening to me—it was all so *unfair*. Bitter tears of self-pity squeezed into my eyes. I pushed her away from me and swung the hammer in a wide, backhand sweep. The force of the blow flung her against the door, and her head struck the window, and a fine thread of blood ran out of her nostril and across her cheek. There was blood on the window, too, a fan-shaped spray of tiny drops. She closed her eyes and turned her face away from me, making a low, guttural noise at the back of her throat. She put a hand up to her head just as I was swinging at her again, and when the blow landed on her temple her fingers were in the way, and I heard one of them crack, and I winced, and almost apologised. Oh! she said, and suddenly, as if everything inside her had collapsed, she slithered down the seat on to the floor.

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There was silence again, clear and startling. I got out of the car and stood a moment, breathing. I was dizzy. Something seemed to have happened to the sunlight, everywhere I looked there was an underwater gloom. I thought I had driven only a little way, and expected to see the gates of Whitewater, and the tour bus, and the driver running towards me, but to my astonishment the road in both directions was empty, and I had no idea where I was. On one side a hill rose steeply, and on the other I could see over the tops of pine trees to far-off, rolling downs. It all looked distinctly improbable. It was like a hastily painted backdrop, especially that smudged, shimmering distance, and the road winding innocently away. I found I was still clutching the hammer. With a grand sweep of my arm I flung it from me, and watched it as it flew, tumbling slowly end over end, in a long, thrilling arc, far, far out over the blue pine-tops. Then abruptly I bent forward and vomited up the glutinous remains of the breakfast I had consumed an age ago, in another life.

I crawled back into the car, keeping my eyes averted from that crumpled thing wedged behind the front seat. The light in the windscreen was a splintered glare, I thought for a second the glass was smashed, until I put a hand to my face and discovered I was crying. This I found encouraging. My tears seemed not just a fore-token of remorse, but the sign of some more common, simpler urge, an affect for which there was no name, but which might be my last link, the only one that would hold, with the world of ordinary things. For everything was changed, where I was now I had not been before. I trembled, and all around me trembled, and there was a sluggish, sticky feel to things, as if I and all of this—car, road, trees, those distant meadows—as if we had all a moment ago struggled mute and amazed out of a birthhole in the air. I turned the key in the ignition, bracing myself, convinced that instead of the engine starting something else would happen, that there would be a terrible, rending noise, or a flash of light, or that slime would gush out over my legs from under the dashboard. I drove in second gear along the middle of the road. Smells, smells. Blood has a hot, thick smell. I wanted to open

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the windows, but did not dare, I was afraid of what might come in—the light outside seemed moist and dense as glair, I imagined it in my mouth, my nostrils.

I drove and drove. Whitewater is only thirty miles or so from the city, but it seemed hours before I found myself in the suburbs. Of the journey I remember little. That is to say, I do not remember changing gears, accelerating and slowing down, working the pedals, all that. I see myself moving, all right, as if in a crystal bubble, flying soundlessly through a strange, sunlit, glittering landscape. I think I went very fast, for I recall a sensation of pressure in my ears, a dull, rushing blare. So I must have driven in circles, round and round those narrow country roads. Then there were houses, and housing estates, and straggling factories, and supermarkets big as aircraft hangers. I stared through the windscreen in dreamy amazement. I might have been a visitor from another part of the world altogether, hardly able to believe how much like home everything looked and yet how different it was. I did not know where I was going, I mean I was not going anywhere, just driving. It was almost restful, sailing along like that, turning the wheel with one finger, shut off from everything. It was as if all my life I had been clambering up a steep and difficult slope, and now had reached the peak and leaped out blithely into the blue. I felt so free. At the first red traffic light the car drifted gently to a stop as if it were subsiding into air. I was at the junction of two suburban roads. On the left there was a little green rise with a chestnut tree and a neat row of new houses. Children were playing on the grassy bank. Dogs gambolled. The sun shone. I have always harboured a secret fondness for quiet places such as this, unremarked yet cherished domains of building and doing and tending. I leaned my head back on the seat and smiled, watching the youngsters at play. The light changed to green, but I did not stir. I was not really there, but lost somewhere, in some sunlit corner of my past. There was a sudden rapping on the window beside my ear. I jumped. A woman with a large, broad, horsey face—she reminded me, dear God, of my mother!—was peering in at me and saying something. I rolled down the window. She had a

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loud voice, it sounded very loud to me, at any rate. I could not understand her, she was talking about an accident, and asking me if I was all right. Then she pressed her face forward and squinted over my shoulder, and opened her mouth and groaned. Oh, she said, the poor child! I turned my head. There was blood all over the back seat now, far too much, surely, for just one person to have shed. For a mad instant, in which a crafty spark of hope flared and died, I wondered if there *had* been a crash, which somehow I had not noticed, or had forgotten, if some overloaded vehicle had ploughed into the back of us, flinging bodies and all this blood in through the rear window. I could not speak. I had thought she was dead, but there she was, kneeling between the seats and groping at the window beside her, I could hear her fingers squeaking on the glass. Her hair hung down in bloodied ropes, her face was a clay mask streaked with copper and crimson. The woman outside was gabbling into my ear about telephones and ambulances and the police—the police! I turned to her with a terrible glare. Madam! I said sternly (she would later describe my voice as *cultured* and *authoritative*), will you please get on about your business! She stepped back, staring in shock. I confess I was myself impressed, I would not have thought I could muster such a commanding tone. I rolled up the window and jammed the car into gear and shot away, noticing, too late, that the lights had turned to red. A tradesman's van coming from the left braked sharply and let out an indignant squawk. I drove on. However, I had not gone more than a street or two when suddenly an ambulance reared up in my wake, its siren yowling and blue light flashing. I was astonished. How could it have arrived so promptly? In fact, this was another of those appalling coincidences in which this case abounds. The ambulance, as I would later learn, was not looking for me, but was returning from—yes—from the scene of a car crash, with—I'm sorry, but yes—with a dying woman in the back. I kept going, haring along with my head down, my nose almost touching the rim of the wheel. I do not think I could have stopped, locked in fright as I was. The ambulance drew alongside, swaying dangerously and trumpeting like a

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frenzied big beast. The attendant in the passenger seat, a burly young fellow in shirt-sleeves, with a red face and narrow sideburns, looked at the blood-streaked window behind me with mild, professional interest. He conferred briefly with the driver, then signalled to me, with complicated gestures, nodding and mouthing, to follow them. They thought I was coming from the same crash, ferrying another victim to hospital. They surged ahead. I followed in their wake, befuddled with alarm and bafflement. I could see nothing but this big square clumsy thing scudding along, whooshing up dust and wallowing fatly on its springs. Then abruptly it braked and swung into a wide gateway, and an arm appeared out of the side window and beckoned me to follow. It was the sight of that thick arm that broke the spell. With a gulp of demented laughter I drove on, past the hospital gate, plunging the pedal to the floor, and the noise of the siren dwindled behind me, a startled plaint, and I was free.

I peered into the mirror. She was sitting slumped on the seat with her head hanging and her hands resting palm upwards on her thighs.

Suddenly the sea was on my left, far below, blue, unmoving. I drove down a steep hill, then along a straight cement road beside a railway track. A pink and white hotel, castellated, with pennants flying, rose up on my right, enormous and empty. The road straggled to an end in a marshy patch of scrub and thistles, and there I stopped, in the midst of a vast and final silence. I could hear her behind me, breathing. When I turned she lifted her sibyl's fearsome head and looked at me. *Help me*, she whispered. *Help me.* A bubble of blood came out of her mouth and burst. *Tommy!* she said, or a word like that, and then: *Love.* What did I feel? Remorse, grief, a terrible—no no no, I won't lie. I can't remember feeling anything, except that sense of strangeness, of being in a place I knew but did not recognise. When I got out of the car I was giddy, and had to lean on the door for a moment with my eyes shut tight. My jacket was bloodstained, I wriggled out of it and flung it into the stunted bushes—they never found it, I can't think why. I remembered the pullover in the boot, and put

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it on. It smelled of fish and sweat and axle-grease. I picked up the hangman's hank of rope and threw that away too. Then I lifted out the picture and walked with it to where there was a sagging barbed-wire fence and a ditch with a trickle of water at the bottom, and there I dumped it. What I was thinking of, I don't know. Perhaps it was a gesture of renunciation or something. Renunciation! How do I dare use such words. The woman with the gloves gave me a last, dismissive stare. She had expected no better of me. I went back to the car, trying not to look at it, the smeared windows. Something was falling on me: a delicate, silent fall of rain. I looked upwards in the glistening sunlight and saw a cloud directly overhead, the merest smear of grey against the summer blue. I thought: I am not human. Then I turned and walked away.

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Jorie Graham

The Phase After History

1.

Then two juncoes trapped in the house this morning.
  The house like a head with nothing inside.
The voice says: come in.
  The voice always whispering *come in, come.*
Stuck on its one track.
  As if there were only one track.

Only one way in.
  Only one *in.*
The house like a head with nothing inside.
  A table in the white room.
Scissors on the table.
  Two juncoes flying desperately around the
room of the house like a head
  (with nothing inside)
the voice-over keeping on (come in, *in*),
  them fizzing around the diagram that makes no

  sense—garden of upstairs and downstairs—wilderness
of materialized
  meaning.
Home.
  Like this piece of paper,
yes take this piece of paper,
  the map of the house like a head with
whatever inside—two birds—

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and on it all my efforts to get the *house* out of their way—
to make detail withdraw its hot hand,
its competing naturalness.
Then I open the two doors to make a draft,
(here),
meaning by that an imbalance

for them to find and ride—
the inaudible hiss, justice, washing through,
the white sentence that comes alive to
rectify imbalance—
—give me a minute.

In the meantime
they fly into the panes of glass: bright light,
silently they throw themselves into its law: bright light,
they float past dreamed-up onto the screen
called 7 am, nesting season, black blurry terms,
the thwacking of their
heads onto resistant
surfaces.
Then one escapes,

sucked out by the doorful of sky,
the insanity—*elsewhere*—
so that—give me a second—
I no longer remember it—
and the other one vanishes though into here, upstairs,
the voice still hissing under the track *in in*,

the voice still hissing over the track.
What you do now is wait
for the sound of wings to be heard
somewhere in the house
—the *peep* as of glass bottles clinking,
the lisp of a left-open book read by breeze,
or a hand going in to the pile of dead leaves—

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(as where there is no *in*, therefore)
(as where—give me a minute—someone laughs upstairs
but it's really wings
rustling up there
on the cold current called history
which means of course it's late and I've
got things

to do).
How late is it: for instance, is this a sign?
Two birds then one: is it a meaning?
I start with the attic, moving down.
Once I find it in the guest-
bedroom but can't
catch it in time,
talking to it all along, hissing: stay there, don't

move—absolutely no
story—sure there is a sound I could make with my throat
and its cupful of wind that could transmit
meaning. *Still* I say sharply as I move towards it, hands out—
High-pitched the sound it makes with its throat,
low and too tender the sound it makes with its

body—against the walls now,
down.
Which America is it in?
Which America are we in here?
Is there an America comprised wholly
of its waiting and my waiting and all forms of the thing

even the green's—
a large uncut fabric floating above the soil—
a place of *attention*?
The voice says wait. Taking a lot of words.
The voice always says wait.
The sentence like a tongue
in a higher mouth

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to make the other utterance, the inaudible one,
possible,
the sentence in its hole, its cavity
of listening,
flapping, half-dead on the wing, through the
hollow indoors,
the house like a head
with nothing inside
except this breeze,
shall we keep going?
Where is it, in the century clicking by?
Where, in the America that *exists*?
This castle hath a pleasant seat,

the air nimbly recommends itself,
the guest approves
by his beloved mansionry
that heaven's breath smells wooingly here.

2.

The police came and got Stuart, brought him to
Psych Hospital.
The face on him the face he'd tried to cut off.
Starting at the edge where the hair is fastened.
Down behind the ear.
As if to lift it off and give it back. Easy. Something
gelatinous,
an exterior
destroyed by mismanagement.

Nonetheless it stayed on.
You suffer and find the outline, the right
seam (what the suffering is for)—
you find *where it comes off*: why can't it come off?
The police brought him to Admitting and he can
be found there.

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Who would have imagined a face
  could be so full of blood.

Later he can be found in a room on 4.
  He looks up when you walk in but not at yours.
Hope is something which lies flat against the wall,
  a bad paint job, peeling in spots.
Some people move by in the hallway,

  some are referred elsewhere or they
wait.
  There is a transaction going on up ahead, a commotion.
Shelley is screaming about the princess.
  There is a draft here but between two unseen
openings.
  And there is the western God afraid His face would come off
into our eyes
  so that we have to wait in the cleft
rock—remember?—
  His hand still down on it we're waiting for Him to
go by,

  the back of Him is hope, remember,
the off-white wall,
  the thing-in-us-which-is-a-kind-of-fire fluttering
as we wait in here
  for His hand to lift off,
the thing-in-us-which-is-a-kind-of-air
  getting coated with waiting, with the cold satinfinish,

the thing-which-trails-behind (I dare do all that may
  become a man,
who dares do more is none)
  getting coated, thickly. Oh screw thy story to the
sticking place—
  When he looks up

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because he has had the electric shock,
and maybe even the insulin shock we're not sure,
the face is gone.
It's hiding somewhere in here now.
I look and there's no listening in it, foggy place.
We called him the little twinkler
says his mother at the commitment hearing,

because he was the happiest.
The blood in the upstairs of the duplex getting cold.
Then we have to get the car unimpounded.
Send the keys to his parents.
Do they want the car?
His wrists tied down to the side of the bed.
And the face on that shouldn't come off.
The face on that mustn't come off.
Scars all round it along the hairline under the
chin.
Later he had to take the whole body off

to get to the face.
But me in there while he was still breathing,
both of us waiting to hear something rustle
and get to it
before it rammed its lights out
aiming for the brightest spot, the only clue.

3.

Because it is the face
which must be taken off—
the forward-pointing of it, history?,
that we be returned to the faceless
attention,
the waiting and waiting for the telling sound.
Am I alone here?
Did it get out when the other one did

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and I miss it?
  Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.
The head empty, yes,

  but on it the face, the idea of principal witness,
the long corridor behind it—
  a garden at one end and a garden at
the other—
  the spot of the face
on the expanse of the body,
  the spot on the emptiness (tomorrow and tomorrow),
the spot pointing
  into every direction, looking, trying to find
corners—

(and all along the cloth of Being fluttering)
  (and all along the cloth, the sleep—
before the beginning, before the itch—)
  How I would get it back
sitting here on the second floor landing,
  one flight above me one flight below,
listening for the one notch
  on the listening which isn't me

listening—
  Sleep, sleep, but on it the dream of reason, eyed,
pointing forward, tapering for entry,
  the *look* with its meeting place at
vanishing point, blade honed for
  quick entry,
etcetera, glance, glance again,
  (make my keen knife see not the
wound it makes)—
  So that you 1) must kill the King—yes—
2) must let her change, change—until you lose her,
  the creature made of nets,

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whose eyes are closed,
whose left hand is raised
(now now now now hisses the voice)
(her hair made of sentences) and
3) something new come in but
what? listening.
Is the house empty?
Is the emptiness housed?
Where is America here from the landing, my face on

my knees, eyes closed to hear
further?
Lady M. is the intermediary phase.
God help us.
Unsexed unmanned.
Her open hand like a verb slowly descending onto the free,
her open hand fluttering all round her face now,
trying to still her gaze, to snag it on

those white hands waving and diving
in the water that is not there.

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Hayden Carruth

Clearing

The white birch saplings choiring in a praise
of sunlight, spring, late April, the little voices
of nature's chorus for the clearing that was
the place of action. Human beings were
doing what they do there with foolish food
and rancorous wine. The moss was
probably misinformed; it chanted its chant
on two changes, like the Grateful Dead
over and over. The granite outcrop
against which the creatures of thought
sat leaning in their blondness was of quieter
intent. But the clearing, the clearing!—and who
had suppressed the trees there to clarify
a forest for these thinkers and wine-drinkers?
My dears, a great misconception amounting
to a misdemeanor, for the forest did it, this
clearing is as the clearing of water when
a cloud uncovers the sun, as the
brightening of the western sky when the storm has
passed over. That is what a clearing is.
This lightening of the labyrinthine is as
lovely as if no thought had ever thought it,
the forest's own affect, enjoyed by that
patch of trailing arbutus in the granite's
lap and benediction. Let's go home.

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Das Daff steht unversehrt. Ohne sie zu hören, sieht
man hochoben am Himmel die weisse Spur der Verkehrs- /blauen
flugzeuge. ~~Das Tal ist unversehrt, waldig wie zur~~
~~Steinzeit.~~ Die Hänge ~~ringum~~ haben das Gefälle, das
~~ihnen~~ bekommt, das sich nicht ändert; Es gibt
Halden von Geröll, da und dort Felsbrocken, hausgross
und grösser, aber da liegen sie seit Menschengedenken.
~~Tannen wachsen darauf.~~ Manchmal hört man die Motorsäge
der Holzfäller, die man nicht sieht. Alles in allem
ein stilles Tal, wenn nicht grad gehupt wird, ~~ein~~
~~grünes Tal, waldig wie zur Steinzeit.~~ Die Steinbrüche
sind hinten im Tal und hochoben, ab und zu hört
man Sprengungen; ~~aber~~ später fahren Lastwagen mit
grossen Blöcken oder Platten hinunter durchs Tal.
Viele Kastanien haben den Krebs. Alles in allem ein
grünes Tal, waldig wie zur Steinzeit. Im August gibt es
Pilze, das Farnkraut wird fast mannshoch. Ab und zu
knattert ein Helikopter ~~über dem stillen Tal~~, der
~~Tonne voll Zement, Sprengstoff, Baustoff transportiert~~; eine Weile lang flattert
sein Schall über dem stillen Tal, dann Stille, kurzdarauf
flattert er zurück und verschwindet. Sonst ereignet
sich wenig. ~~Im August sieht man Sternschnuppen und~~
~~hört die Käuzchen.~~ Wo das Gemäuer besonnt ist,
wimmelt es von Eidechsen; sie sonnen sich auf dem

~~[illegible]~~

A manuscript page from Man in the Holocene, *a novella by Max Frisch.*

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The Art of Fiction CXIII
Max Frisch

Max Frisch was born in a suburb of Zurich, Switzerland, on May 15, 1911. By the age of twenty-six he had published two works, the novel Jürg Reinhart *(1934), and* Answer from Silence, *a novella (1937), both of which he burned in 1937 along with everything he had written up to then, vowing never to write again. "I had to make two trips into the woods, there were so many bundles," he writes in* Sketchbook 1946–1949. *It was a vow he broke two years later by writing about his experience as a border patrol guard in the Swiss Army (*Leaves From a Knapsack, *1940). In 1942 the author*

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opened his own architectural design office, and Zurich's public swimming pool is the result of a competition he won in 1949. After the war Frisch wrote and produced several plays in Zurich and began an important friendship with Bertolt Brecht. In 1954, the publication of I'm Not Stiller *brought the author worldwide fame, and by the end of that year he was able to close his architectural practice and devote himself full-time to writing. Since then Frisch has navigated several genres with equal, and extraordinary, mastery: plays, including his best-known* The Firebugs *(1958),* Andorra *(1961), and* Biography: A Game *(1967); memoirs,* Sketchbook 1946–1949, Sketchbook 1966–1971 *and* Montauk (1975); *novels,* Homo Faber *(1957) and* Gantenbein *(1964); and two classic novellas,* Man in the Holocene *(1979) and* Bluebeard *(1982).*

On the Sunday evening in September of 1984 when I arrived in Zurich to interview Frisch, he informed me by phone that he wasn't feeling well and asked if we could postpone our interview until Wednesday. I took the free days to explore Zurich—its narrow, café-cluttered streets and posh bank-lined avenues that have been home to Frisch for nearly seventy-three years. It is a city that in many ways has been as marked by the author as he has been marked by it; here he has spoken out on everything from urban planning to Switzerland's position in the world, its "guilt of the guiltless." When Frisch walks down the streets of this city strangers tip their hats to him, as to an old and revered friend.

Wednesday morning the author met me at my hotel and together we walked back to his spacious triplex apartment nearby. Frisch, with his strong hiker's gait, easily outpaced me. "I had hoped we could take a walk in the country and talk there, but it's not very nice weather and I'm afraid I'm not quite well yet. Perhaps tomorrow," he apologized. His speech was halting, with a Swiss-German lilt that sounded almost like a brogue.

Frisch expressed some reservations about our interview: "Stone Age, Iron Age, Interview Age—it's so vulgar. *It's not so interesting to have these questions and answers. You must*

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have a dialogue." *It's a word that for Frisch signifies not just an aspect of craft but a way of life, something that has been expressed in everything he has done, from his active citizenship to his work in the theater and the novels he has created. It was expressed in our interview, as well as our conversations over the next three days—of which this text represents only a small fraction.*

INTERVIEWER

I'd like to begin with some questions about your most recent book, *Bluebeard*. When did you first get the idea for this project?

MAX FRISCH

It began when I first came back from the United States and dropped in on a trial of a friend of mine. The trial had just begun the day before, and it was a case of murder, a very strange case. Without any particular intention I got there and became extremely interested not only in the case—which is different from the *Bluebeard* story—but in the language of the court. The fascination for me was in the ritualization of the word. In the court it's always the same sentence, the truth and nothing but the truth. I ask you this and that. This standardization of the language has the elements of music or architecture. The same questions come again and again, in different situations. I was actually fascinated more by the language than by the story.

INTERVIEWER

Bluebeard gives the impression of having been written quickly and easily. Was it?

FRISCH

Oh, no. In fact, it was twice the length it is now. I had the opportunity to make a so-called realistic, old-style novel to get a complete picture of the characters, their different standards, milieus, and so on. It would have included many more witnesses and interrogations so that we learn how *they*, the wit-

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nesses, live, what they think, their prejudices and their mental diseases. But I was unable to sustain the tension I needed. Melville could do it in *Moby Dick*, but I couldn't.

INTERVIEWER

Dialogue seems important to you.

FRISCH

When I started to write in college, I wrote plays, not narrative. I was afraid of narrative. My first interest was the theater, not literature. It has to do with what I tried to say before, this fascination with the court language, which is all dialogue. As soon as I start to tell a story or describe a landscape, I can't keep to this ritual language.

INTERVIEWER

Many of your heroes after *I'm Not Stiller* are technocrats, or men who are not self-reflective, who give a very flat testimony of their lives.

FRISCH

Yes, that's especially the case with *Homo Faber*. That was the point, that a man is giving an interpretation that is flat, flatter than life is. Walter denies he has experiences because he's very helpless in expressing his emotions. So he describes himself as flatly as possible. He has the arrogance to say nothing. He realizes too late that he was engaged emotionally in many, many things. I think Stiller is much more telling about his feelings.

INTERVIEWER

In *Bluebeard*, too, Herr Schaad says, "What helps is billiards." He never says, "I'm suffering."

FRISCH

That's perfectly true. Actually, it has to do with my own personality, probably. I have very strong feelings but I don't like to describe them. There are other ways to show them—body

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language, or silence—that can be very strong. And maybe, too, one has a distrust of words; one fears that they won't be interpreted correctly. It's very difficult to describe a feeling and not to lie a little bit, to put it on a higher level or to blind yourself. So I don't trust myself to describe my feelings, but I like to show them by a piece of art. And as a reader I'm the same, I don't like it if the author tells me what I have to feel. He has to urge the reader to get a feeling of shame or of hope. So there's a lot of feeling, there's a lot of emotion, but . . . not expressed in words.

INTERVIEWER

In that sense your writing hasn't been given over to the prevalent mode of confessional writing, the writing of what one might call "psychoanalytic culture."

FRISCH

Yes, I hate that in literature. I have a good friend who is excellent at that but I always feel as if I'm sitting in a therapy session with him.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first decide to create the flat, cold, "affectless" hero we have been discussing?

FRISCH

Hard to know. I think I made it not all at once, but slowly; gradually it felt more and more comfortable. Just now I think—I don't know if it's right or wrong—that if you describe emotions, or the hero describes his emotions, as in the work of Dostoevsky, for instance, or Melville, or other great writers, the danger that you will fall into the conventional is very great. It was Goethe who told us how we feel if we are in love with a girl—there are forms for that. But suppose you try to establish a situation, a movement, to show gestures and faces, and not talk about it. This is closer to film than old literature was. We have learned a lot from movies about what can be expressed without words. I would be proud or happy if a reader

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could feel the essential situation of, say, the man in *Man in the Holocene*, to feel how it is to be wet in your pants, how it's getting colder, the feeling of growing tired, of melancholy or despair. *That* you get without using all those words. *That* you feel sensually and see with your eyes. I want to give that, or I try, anyway.

INTERVIEWER

By creating these flat characters you're also giving them the freedom to express themselves metaphorically, through objects. "What helps is billiards," to come back to that phrase.

FRISCH

That's right. If Herr Schaad would write a letter to a friend, "Now I am free, I can do what I want and I'm perfectly depressed, I'm desperate, and I'm poor," I'd say, "Well, come on over, have a drink." But if all he says is "the only thing that helps is billiards"—that's desperation. If a friend phoned me and said something like that I'd say, "I have to go, I have to have a look at him."

INTERVIEWER

Why do some of your characters, as different from one another as they are, possess your own traits? They all seem to smoke pipes or their first girlfriends are Jewish.

FRISCH

It's a kind of laziness. Some friends warned me. Uwe Johnson said, "Max, is it really necessary for this guy to smoke a pipe?" We both smoked a pipe at the time. And I didn't even realize it. It's just laziness. And I forget. I forget that I've written it so many times. It's a little mistake, but I feel it is a mistake. All the boyfriends have the same car, a Jaguar. And if I see it later I'm not pleased with it. I'm angry about always taking things that are next to me [*taps pipe*], instead of getting up and taking something from the kitchen.

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INTERVIEWER

As a writer, what does it mean to have an experience, to want to write about that experience?

FRISCH

I think that one has experiences without having the means to verbalize them, and this is my situation. Speaking frankly, I don't want to write about experiences I've had which I've already written about. I could write them better, but that's not so interesting. I'm experiencing something now and I don't know what it is. And that makes me silent. And easily bored by everything else. But what is this experience? What is it? And if you asked me I'd say, "Well, I don't know." It's not nothing, it's not emptiness, and the hope is that sometimes this finds expression.

INTERVIEWER

I'd like to demystify your writing process, if that's at all possible. Can you tell me in concrete terms how you go from a sketch to a book?

FRISCH

In *Triptych*, for example, I know that I didn't have an idea. I didn't think about Hades or anything like that, but about a theatrical situation: in a rocking chair, a youngish woman—she has a bodily presence, with a voice, an erotic, magic presence. And she speaks as a dead person, that's all we see for the moment. This contradiction was the start for *Triptych*. The entire play is built around this. In general, I see a scene or a situation that inspires me to write, but I don't know if it's in the middle of the whole thing, or if it's the beginning. You grope your way. I *don't* want to have a plan. If I do, I'm certain not to write from genuine experience. Take, for instance, the incest in *Homo Faber*. Only after I wrote the book did I understand where the thought had come from. And if I had *known* where this thought had come from, I'm sure I wouldn't have had the

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courage to touch the whole thing. But the story in itself, the story worked. And before you have a chance to get frightened, it's already written.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a kind of control that is not within your conscious grasp?

FRISCH

Yes, I have this control that tells me when to cut something, improve it, or give it up, often without knowing why. But just how much of this capacity you have is important in determining, I think, whether you're a writer or not. If you criticize what you're doing too early you'll never write the first line. Then, if you don't have this capacity at all, that's also a danger. Before I published *Man in the Holocene*, it was not a bad book, but I had an uncomfortable feeling about it. That's criticism. Then after I wrote a second draft I had the feeling, "Now it works, now it's okay." And afterwards, again this shock that it *didn't* work. If I hadn't had that feeling it would have been published and I would never have reached the point I could reach. You're awfully dependent on that critical sense. When I was young, around thirty, it took me much more time to get the feeling of a scene, to know whether it worked or not, and to be able to give up on it if it didn't. I would work for half a year sometimes on something that didn't work—I couldn't give up.

INTERVIEWER

I suppose when you're young you're not sure that if you cut those flowers others are going to grow in their place.

FRISCH

Yes, that's right. Later you say, "I'm not sure, but I have a right to hope."

INTERVIEWER

What would your advice be to a beginning writer?

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FRISCH

For someone who is serious and who already has a sense of his or her own talent, I would say to continue without involving too many people who think in commercial terms. When I was younger I felt it was dangerous to talk about my work with others. In the beginning, I didn't inform anybody at all, not my wife, not friends, not my publisher. I remember my publisher asked me when I came back from the United States, "Are you working?" "I'm working, I'm working. *Wildly*," I told him. He didn't ask what it was and I didn't tell him whether it was a play or a novel. Then one day I arrived in Frankfurt and said, "Here it is." "What is it?" "It's a novel." That was *Stiller*. I would also say to measure yourself by very high standards. The greatest help is to have a friend who can criticize you from high standards. I had that with Peter Suhrkamp. He had courage and another marvelous quality, which is that his judgment didn't change according to whether something was a success or failure. In some cases he would say, "Well, well, that's great. It got marvelous reviews, and now you think, Max, that it is a good book? I don't think so." He was a great man, but not an easy man. In general I've had more help from writers than from critics. A writer is not less critical, but he knows about empty paper. A writer like Friedrich Dürrenmatt knows, for example, "Oh, you have great possibilities here." A critic doesn't see the chance you have in a project. If Shakespeare had talked about the project of *Hamlet* with a critic, he would have been told, "Look, man, you'd better write a novel. That's a man who can't act. You want to do theater with *that*? The hero is not special; his only special quality is that he hesitates, that he can't act and so finally he gets killed. That's not good for theater!"

INTERVIEWER

What did you find most valuable about working in the theater—and do you still value it?

FRISCH

You mean what's important for me? As a young man I was

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fascinated by the theater and not by the drama. That means the body on stage, the voice, etc. In the last play I wrote—that was *Triptych*—I didn't want to give a plot or action, but rather bodies in situations on the stage. What you have in the living theater, for example. So I am still attracted by the theater, by the magic presence of the body and the voice, and the contradiction that develops between the image given by the word and the visual image—that's still interesting. The drama, no. The problem with theater today—this is not my personal problem but a general one—is that we are no longer in a time or social situation where power can be shown. Now things are much more anonymous and collective. It would be wrong, for example, to show fascism only by Hitler on the stage. It doesn't fit. If the play is only about human relationships, then yes, you can do it. But if it has political implications—I tried to do it with the parable in the way Georg Büchner, who was my master, did. I used the parable in *Andorra* and *The Firebugs*. With the parable you think—you hope—you can get a complicated reality. Nowadays I doubt that too, because the parable always has the tendency to prove something, to teach something, and I found out that I don't have to teach. I just want to show the thing—and so I have stopped using parables.

INTERVIEWER

Andorra and *The Firebugs* are both meant to be lessons, aren't they?

FRISCH

Yes, the first one tried to show how a prejudice is born. I wanted to show how it becomes a common disease in Andre's community—a projection of behavior they themselves have, and which they hate. It's how to get rid of self-hatred. *Andorra* is a model, and it gets read in German, French, and English schools. It's something they can learn—but it's not theater, though it has elements of theater. Well, if it's important I'm proud that I did it, but it's not theater.

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INTERVIEWER

You did a short sketch of *The Firebugs* in the 1940s, didn't you?

FRISCH

Yes, actually, many of the later books have their first sketches in that diary. That was at a time when I was an architect. I had time, but not a lot of time. I had a morning or a Sunday or so, but I couldn't start a whole novel. But I had ideas so I made sketches. I didn't know at all that I would come back to this material.

INTERVIEWER

Many of your books involve events which are fantastic or difficult to believe. Do you feel it necessary for a reader to believe that events you describe could actually have taken place?

FRISCH

In the early days I thought it was a condition *sine qua non* that you had to believe, otherwise it's a bad book. Then I think it changed. Actually, with *Gantenbein* I took the position that everything was offered as a hypothesis, and that it was not important for you to believe it. It's playing with possibilities. I don't believe that one's biography can only have been *this* way—your life could have been quite different. Literature should show possibilities and avoid the idea that *what happened had to happen*. I don't believe this aphorism.

INTERVIEWER

If you're going to allow the reader his own disbelief, do you also have to change the form of the work? That is, can you have unbelievable things happening within a classic form?

FRISCH

I don't think one has to change the form. One has to—as I tried to do with *Gantenbein*—show the different possibilities.

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INTERVIEWER

Sometimes it takes another person to tell you what has happened to you.

FRISCH

Yes, and I'm still blind. I don't know what it's about and they tell me, and I'm happy that I don't know. Because if you know what you're writing about, the danger is very great that it will fall into cliches, or into Freudianism, or other things. But if you don't know, in a way you're blind, groping your way; then when you look back you see you have made your road.

INTERVIEWER

The opening sentence of *Man in the Holocene* reads, "It should be possible to build a pagoda of crispbread, to think of nothing, to hear no thunder, no rain . . . Perhaps no pagoda will emerge, but the night will pass." One accepts it upon first reading. Then suddenly, it strikes one, "What is this man thinking of?" It's a remarkable image, a weird image. How did you come upon it?

FRISCH

I think you're right; reading it for the first time it's a little unusual, a little crazy. A person with strange problems, obviously; we feel he's doing nonsense, he's bored, and we understand he has to wait because of the rain. Later when you know him it acquires a different meaning even if one doesn't go back to read the book again, but simply remembers the sentence. A pagoda is a full, complete picture of the world. That's what he tries to have because he's afraid that the world will get lost. And what he's doing with this crispbread, of course, is just the opposite. So it's a dream that the world should be perfect, that we should be able to view it as a whole in its perfect, clear beauty. I started only the last version of the book with that sentence. Before then I had it later on, on the second page. It was important to have it for the beginning; otherwise you get the description of the painful weather, so what? Only this pagoda

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sentence brings it immediately onto another level. There must be something else. That's, of course, what you call craft, isn't it?

INTERVIEWER

Nearly all of your characters think of or attempt suicide—why is this?

FRISCH

First I have to check and see if what you're saying is true . . . *Stiller*, no.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, do you remember, two years before the narrative starts.

FRISCH

The angel, yes. *Homo Faber*, no. *Gantenbein*, I don't know. But it's true. *Bluebeard*, yes, of course. *Man in the Holocene*, it was a kind of suicide, a liberating suicide, not an act of desperation, or despair. Obviously it has to do with the author himself, that *I* was thinking about it, though I never tried it. I have it also in the first *Sketchbook*, that's right, in a more comic sense—that group of old people who form a society for voluntary death. But for them, suicide comes from a fear of losing—again the word comes up—identity, of losing their personality. To be just a body, half animal, no longer capable of making your own decisions. It's also a problem with fading—fading hope, fading health, getting weaker. It alters the capacity to do something like that. Many people say, "If I knew I had cancer, I'd commit suicide," but they don't. Because very soon the point comes where the willpower is no longer strong enough. They lose their capacity of choice. Obviously I'm afraid of that, of losing this sovereignty.

INTERVIEWER

Many of your characters say that what they fear most is repetition. Your own work seems to mirror this fear. There's one

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big novel, a variety of plays, and recently, a novella. You, too, seem not to have wanted to repeat yourself in your art.

FRISCH

Right, right. It's a fear; it's difficult to keep yourself really alive, or genuine, or open for new experience. It doesn't have to do with age. In my case I was afraid that if I worked for a long time in the same way, I'd no longer be creative, I'd be getting comfortable, mentally lazy. And I had to change; I was afraid of living without being alive. That's a very personal fear I have. And it's a fear I have for other people, people I love, that they might get comfortable, get so used to things that life will fade.

INTERVIEWER

You have said that you wrote the first five pages of *I'm Not Stiller* here in Zurich all at once, but that six hundred pages had already been written, in New York. So that basically when you wrote those five pages the book had already been written. Is that correct?

FRISCH

That's a bit of an anecdote. When I was in New York that year I wrote a novel. It was not a good novel; it was a very autobiographical, half-private novel. But it had a lot of material in it. Then when I got home I had the so-called *Stiller* idea, about a man who returns home, a person with my taste, and he doesn't want to be at home and so on. The idea was very simple. Then I wrote that book. After the book was already in galleys I wrote the first two pages. I started with the simple sentence, "I'm not Stiller." But the title in German is only *Stiller.* It was the translator who had the idea to take the first line, "I'm not Stiller," and use it for the title in America. It's a very funny beginning. But I thought of this line in the very last hours before the book got printed; it's like tea—it makes eating the whole meal easier.

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INTERVIEWER

I'd like to bring up the question of Stiller's finding God. I was frankly disappointed in this because I felt that Stiller, through his suicide attempt, was changing, evolving, on his own. Why does he need this God, this angel, to sanctify his self-recognition?

FRISCH

That's a very good question, and a very painful question. I wouldn't go so far as to say the whole religious element in the book is not honest, but it's rather an influence I had at that time from reading Kierkegaard, and it was more a reading experience than a real one. I tried to live up a little bit to something—I don't know what—so I made a grave mistake. And I couldn't change it. The book was published and was already known. The book should have ended with the six notebooks by Stiller and not this epilogue written by the prosecutor—who is all of a sudden a writer, too. It's silly, isn't it? In the epilogue it gets more objective. Stiller knows that his notebooks are subjective, and then comes this Holy Ghost, the narrator. He takes the whole thing and puts it on a religious pillow. I don't feel comfortable with that. To defend myself, I will say that that was one of the very few times when I seriously tried to find out whether I could become religious or not. I was trying it out, you know. And as my other books showed, I couldn't retain it. I had started to read Kierkegaard because of this great feeling. I took a passage from Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* to use for the epigraph for *I'm Not Stiller*—and if I could change the book I would remove it. But at the time I was so happy to read in a few lines what I had tried to deliver over pages and pages. I should have had a good friend who could have warned me not to follow the Stiller notebooks with that epilogue, but the book is there; I can't change it now . . . Actually, I did get warned.

INTERVIEWER

Who warned you?

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FRISCH

Dürrenmatt. He read it; he was very excited about it, about his Frisch friend. "Now you have it and now you smash it!" It was not easy to tell me that. When it was still in manuscript, if somebody had told me, "Come, stop it, forget about it," I wouldn't have listened. I didn't want to know. Later—it was some years later—I *saw*. There has been a lot of criticism of *Stiller* but this is the essential point. It's strange that the critics—there were a lot of them, from the socialists to the Christians—never mentioned this thing. Until our meeting. Until now.

INTERVIEWER

I noticed that a central concept for you, both in this novel and elsewhere, is the idea that it is a sin to form a fixed image of a person. What Stiller does to Julika, for example.

FRISCH

I wrote that little piece first in *Sketchbook*—before *Stiller*. I said that you shouldn't form a graven image of man. And I didn't know it at the time, but this was a key point for my thinking and feeling. It's found again in *Andorra*. An image means a prejudice. I don't think I could as yet describe your appearance or your character, but if you came again tomorrow I would not be perfectly open; I would already have some prejudices—perhaps good ones—but I would have some. That will happen. That has to happen. It is against the tendency we have to petrify things. It's an invitation to keep you alive, to keep you ready to rethink things and not to repeat. Of course, it's not meant that one has to keep this openness all the time. But it's a warning. When you meet someone for the first time, or fall in love, you say to yourself, "I'm not supposed to be able to do this, but here I am." I could start to fly and she'd say, "That's not at all surprising." That's something marvelous. That's a real honeymoon. Later: "I *know* that. I know that in a difficult discussion with your father, you're a coward. I know it, come on. I'm sick of it."

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INTERVIEWER

So many of your heroes have bad consciences. What sins have your characters committed in order to have such bad consciences?

FRISCH

Actually, I don't know sin. I know guilt.

INTERVIEWER

So there's no connection between sin and guilt?

FRISCH

You know the awful thing—I know I'm not answering your question—is that we *in this neo-Christian age still* have some fixed ideas about believing in the whole thing, the whole Christian church. For instance, let's take sexuality. As a very young boy I was very upset when I realized I had an erection. A sin. This goddamned erection, and so on. I didn't know who had told me about that. I wasn't even three years old yet and already there was this burden of judgment. Everything was so unclear, it was so disturbing. The idea that by birth you are born a sinner. Why? I didn't ask to be born. Why do I have to be born on a blacklist?

INTERVIEWER

But is it religious mores or something else that's eating away at your heroes?

FRISCH

It's a bad conscience. I think I have it without knowing why, or what it is. Of course there is one positive thing that came out of this religious education, and that is Christ's Sermon on the Mount. That's brotherhood, piety, anti-fascism. Not "the strong is right," but "I can kill that person but I shouldn't." That's the origin of socialism. But living for an examination, just to take another examination at the end . . .

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INTERVIEWER

Another Frisch questionnaire . . .

FRISCH

So awful! It's just an awful idea. But let's take another approach to your question about sin. For me, I think sin would be a lack of capacity for love. If I'm not able to love anybody, not even myself, or my dog, not my mother, or you—this inability to love would be a sin. Perhaps not the word "sin," but "disaster." Therefore, the heaviest accusation I can imagine is the one I have in *Triptych*—that someone would tell you you are incapable of loving. So you're a liar, you're cruel, you're possessive—these are minor details compared with that. Not being able to love, for me that means not being allowed to exist.

INTERVIEWER

Do you identify with Switzerland in the question of sin and taking responsibility for guilt, specifically in relation to the last war?

FRISCH

I always hate to be reduced to being only Swiss or European. But something about this is right. There's a German expression, "the guilt of the guiltless." Having not acted doesn't mean being free from guilt. In *Bluebeard* there's guilty thinking—or guilty feeling. Guilt starts before the act. In a society which is theocratic, highly structured by religion, I don't think you could have this Schaad syndrome, this feeling of guilt without knowing why.

INTERVIEWER

I know you object to being called a "Swiss writer," but do you think you would have posed the problem of guilt in the same way had you not been Swiss?

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FRISCH

It probably would have been different, yes. What especially gets to me is the way the official part of this country believes in its innocence. Italy doesn't. Italy's beautiful, Italy's poor, Italy's great—but not innocent. But here we are, rich and guiltless. So you're right that you're stamped to a certain degree by your nationality.

INTERVIEWER

In a nuclear age such as ours, when countries have the power to kill each other several times over, is the question of guilt and responsibility a relevant one?

FRISCH

That's a good question. Of course it's cynical, it makes us cynical. I hate the idea that we are free from obligation, the normal, man-size obligation to try to fight something— to try to fight dullness, the public's dullness. But I'm not a good example at the moment. My generation, with its belief in socialism, whatever that is, we are perfectly defeated. Ernest Bloch and the others, they've all gone, gone with the times. There's nothing left. It's been only ten or fifteen years since Berkeley and the free speech movement, or the demonstrations in May '68 in Paris, Frankfurt, and Berlin—but it's Roman history. "What did Cicero say?" "Oh, I don't know, he was a great man of some sort." Imagine if Jean-Paul Sartre came and spoke today, in front of a real audience here.

INTERVIEWER

It would be very sad.

FRISCH

It would be Don Quixote fighting windmills. They wouldn't know what he was talking about. "I *know* I'm dead—but . . . how long has it been?" Now, as an old man, it makes me sad.

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INTERVIEWER

If there were a nuclear holocaust, who would be around to ask who was guilty, who was to blame?

FRISCH

After? Nobody. The rats. And they'll be fine.

INTERVIEWER

You developed a friendship with Bertolt Brecht toward the end of his life. What influence did this friendship have on you and on your work?

FRISCH

First of all, he was the first great writer I knew personally. That makes a difference. He gave me an idea of how serious art-making is, and also how great a part rationalism has in art. He was not a romantic writer. So I had a master. And then I saw truly great theater for the first time, theater that he made first here in Zurich and later in Berlin. He taught me about what we were talking about before, about narrative. That I don't have to show the feelings of the character on stage. I understand his feelings, and I judge his feelings. This distance is what he called alienation. You don't need to make theater or art reproduce normal life.

INTERVIEWER

What other advice did Brecht give you?

FRISCH

He wrote me a letter; it's a marvelous letter. In it he wrote that I have *ein Grossentod*, a great thing in my hands, but that I don't have the courage to use the great forms. The great play, the great essay. Well, then Brecht left for Berlin and I met him from time to time, but rarely, while he was in Zurich just coming from interrogations—it was the time of McCarthy. He was living here, in the country, for a year and a half, in a very cheap

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apartment. I took my bicycle to visit him and I had the feeling that I had been of no use to him, but then he would call and say, "Why don't you come visit?" and he had to invite me again and again.

INTERVIEWER

He must have liked you.

FRISCH

Yes, now I know that in a way he liked me. I was, of course, a bourgeois for him, but not hopeless, not hopeless.

INTERVIEWER

Did he criticize your politics?

FRISCH

Yes, certainly, but not with anger. I was simply not advanced enough. But I was on the right course. He wanted us to write a play together, but I got scared. I had the feeling that if I did this play I'd lose my identity. I would have learned a lot, but I would have lost myself.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see a connection between your earlier political education with Brecht and the writer you eventually became? Your fiction does not seem particularly political.

FRISCH

I think of it in another way. I used the theater for the more political material because the theater is a public event. The so-called private material—father-daughter, father-son, man-woman relationships—that, for me, is the novel.

INTERVIEWER

I read an interview you did with Michel Contat of *Le Monde* in which you said that literature contradicts the discourse of

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the dominant class. At the end of the interview, however, you said, "The nobility of literature is simply to exist." Which is it?

FRISCH

I think the ruling class in any system has a language. The ruling language. And this language is full of prejudices. It's a bourgeois prejudice to say "a poor but honest man." You could also say, "a rich but honest man." Literature is subversive in the sense that it has another language. It's not a counter-power, but a counter-position to power. To write political books that are intended to have the power of a speech on the street is a misunderstanding of the importance of art. But on the other hand, I can't imagine a really good writer not having a political awareness. In your country I was shocked and frightened by the lack of political awareness on the part of intellectuals.

INTERVIEWER

Does the artist have to have a political conscience? Is it valid for an artist simply to create?

FRISCH

I don't believe so. You may not know what can be done politically, but it is important that you do not accept the way it is now, nor accept the lies. At the very minimum, challenge the lie. If you write a story, or a poem, you are in a state of mind of having no good reason to hope; you're powerless, you have lost a lot of hopes, and it is in this landscape that you write.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't there a way of getting around this hopelessness?

FRISCH

I'm not optimistic. One doesn't have to be a pessimist, but most of those who seem to be optimistic—they're just dull,

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or they're hypocrites. If you see somebody falling from the twentieth floor and you call out, "Be optimistic, be optimistic!"—you can do it until the second floor: "How are you, John?" "Still optimistic!" "See you later." Bam.

* * *

Later, Frisch presented me with a monograph on himself, printed in German. He pointed to its many photographs, one by one.

FRISCH

This is me as a young boy, surrounded by women, surrounded by the feminine presence. My God! I don't even know who they all are. Mothers, aunts, all these women. And this is me next to my brother, who is eight years older, and this is my father whom I didn't like and my mother whom I didn't like either . . . . And this is me on skis, wearing a tie. I had married a *grande bourgeoise* and was trying that life for a while. That's what turned me into a Marxist [*laughs*]. This is me with Brecht. Here I am again with Brecht, my trousers are tied at the ankles since I came on my bicycle. I'm explaining the laws of statics to him. Afterwards he said to me, "Max, you've an honest profession." Just like that, a simple statement. And here I am with Günter Grass, and here, Ernst Bloch, at ninety. And here I am with Herbert Marcuse.

INTERVIEWER

Would you like to have a perfect memory?

FRISCH

Of course not.

INTERVIEWER

If you could remember only one thing, what would it be?

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FRISCH

A landscape or a man-woman relationship.

INTERVIEWER

If you could have written only one book, which would it have been?

FRISCH

It should have been a very excellent one, but since I didn't succeed in that, I had to write many. Actually, my feelings about that change from time to time. I think it would not be theater but one of the narrative works. And if I'm still allowed to have a wish, I'd say none of the books but a poem.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write poetry?

FRISCH

Yes, I do. I always try, but I never succeed. Between us, I would say my favorite book, at this time, is *Man in the Holocene*.

INTERVIEWER

What is your greatest regret?

FRISCH

[*long pause*] . . . Yes, but of course, not to be wise, not to be as wise as I pretend to be. That I'm not a little bit more serious—yes, I would say that's it. That I'm capable of understanding the phenomena of things but always a little bit too late.

INTERVIEWER

And if you had only one wish?

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FRISCH

That those liars who are lying or holding power over others die of a soft, normal, natural disease.

INTERVIEWER

What have you found most satisfying about your achievements?

FRISCH

Not only the so-called success, but that this success created a partnership, a communication with a lot of people whom I don't know personally, people of different generations and nationalities—that's a great satisfaction. I'm astonished about it and very grateful.

INTERVIEWER

What have you been the least satisfied with?

FRISCH

I would say . . . you know, it changes all the time. Sometimes, for instance, what bothers me is that I never had a real overview on my abilities, my capacities. I'm always a little bit blind.

INTERVIEWER

So it is the lack of the ability to see things as they are, at the moment?

FRISCH

Yes, but I have grown used to the idea that at any moment I never know exactly where I am. It may be fortunate.

INTERVIEWER

If you could have only one photograph to pass on, with whom would you be pictured, and what would you be doing?

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FRISCH

First, I know it wouldn't be a photograph of the young man, but a photo of the old man. Smoking a pipe, or not smoking a pipe, and not in action. Not posing, if possible.

INTERVIEWER

What does capturing an image on film mean to you? It's a device you use quite often in your work.

FRISCH

I'll tell you that I was never correctly photographed. My wife did it, my former wife. I hated to look at photos, even good ones, even of a beloved person. It's so bad for me, and so I didn't collect them. And I rarely take photos of things I really love—persons and landscapes. And that's the film—as you said—that is sometimes in my narrative work. I had a very strange early experience. A cousin of mine lost his wife. She was young, he was rather young—previously it was not as usual as it is today—and he had made a little movie during the holidays. And he wanted to show it to us. It was a month or so after the funeral. So we looked at it. Well, she was walking in a meadow, taking a few steps. That was all, that was all. It was very short. Then he wanted to see it again, and again, and of course he kept hoping the the next time there would be just a little bit of a different movement. It was exactly the same movement, and that was more dead than her body was dead. And I used that experience; it comes up again and again in *Homo Faber.* Most recently I used the same thing—one can get obsessed with those things—in *Triptych*, when the pilot who had an accident dies and finds his child over there in Hades and they're playing ball. And then again they're not. And it's like a Kodachrome; they're doing the same thing, always the same. What they did, again and again. This is the wrong kind of movement. And for me that's more dead than a body. That's one of those fundamental experiences and it appears again and again in my work.

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INTERVIEWER

If you could remember, could keep forever, just one story, what would it be?

FRISCH

Which one? It would not be the story of my life, or a story I have heard, but a myth. I think it would be the myth of Icarus.

A few months after our interview, I called Mr. Frisch to see if he had any final corrections or comments to add. "Yes," he said. "Tell them that for just a brief moment I flew. Only for a moment—to the kitchen and back—but that you saw me fly."

—**Jodi Daynard**

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Martha Hollander

When We Ride Off

Beginning as usual in the dark
well of an expensive late-night taxi,
you recall this scene; your father rushes
indoors where you, at fifteen, study Greek,
and shouts about the new car. You quit Act
Three of the tragedy, smile, and remove

your glasses; he lets you drive. To remove
myself from that important moment, dark
with suburban closeness, roofs, trees, I act
as if I've always lived in a taxi,
a raw city child, reared above a Greek
restaurant, watching the crowd that rushes

onward past the door just as it rushes
now, in the gloom, always at one remove
from those quiet home roads, those texts in Greek.
You've asked why: because here when it gets dark
the wet streets reflect passion. Our taxi
expands silently for us like an act

of love renewed by the heat of speed. Act
quickly, embrace me as evening rushes
headlong into night like clever taxi
drivers cutting through traffic. I'll remove
only my gloves. In the sibilant dark
we both glimpse our driver's name, which is Greek.

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The drive will be like foreign trips, where Greek
temples loom up and come alive to act
as rare, fearful road-signs, studding the dark
expanse of Europe. There, forest rushes
to meet citadel, and calm fields remove
the noisy past, monstrous as a taxi

in Arcadia. And our lost taxi
whips through grass, unnoticed, like words in Greek
I forget, like your childhood. You remove
your hand, for in the country we must act
like creatures of earth, wet weeds and rushes,
and knowing where we are, breathe in the dark.

It's dark and resonant as a Greek
theater in the taxi. On it rushes,
removing us from the world in one act.

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Two Poems by Marc Cohen

Blue Lonely Dreams

Hi Roy. Hope all is well;
just wanted to drop a line
to let you know we miss you.
Down here, sand is falling,
and it is slack and spare,
pleading in a whisper
that sweeps the leaves
into the drainage gutter,
and shrieks in a slow winded high note
that is not falsetto, but a voice
truly able to hit this note.

How goes the opera, upstairs?
Is it as good as touring the country
and singing for strangers
who care for you and your music?
Now the ghostly words
in the ghostly librettos
are ghosts themselves,
disguised as snowflakes
and floating in the air like a raft on the bayou,
distilled before reaching the ground.

We had tickets for the original
February date at The Beacon.
I had read an article about your induction
into The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame,
and was pleased to learn
that we were both born on April 23rd.
On the day of the concert,
the doctor said they would have to operate

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on my mother's lung cancer.
She stayed with us that night,
insisting that we go to see you play.
I didn't know how I was going to get through it,
but I knew it would be best for everyone if we went.
When we reached the theatre, the marquee read:
TONIGHT'S SHOW CANCELLED. I couldn't believe it:
the immediate feeling was one of voodoo,
or magic, or a shared faith.
It was like being forgiven
for a mistake you were allowed to make,
but hadn't made. The ushers at the door
told us that your throat was sore;
the voice you had loved from the first time
you heard it; the passion you had balanced
with a preacher man's stance.

On March 10th, two days
before the rescheduled concert,
my mother was given a clean bill of health.
Radiation treatments and chemotherapy
would not be needed.
The show you did on Saturday night
was another answered prayer,
and served as a reminder
why other prayers are better left unanswered.
By then, we considered you a good friend.
Who could grasp what depths
your voice was coming from?
It was as familiar and otherly
as a lone tree on a huge, rolling plain.
The walls of The Beacon were swaying,
and the red and white notes were birds
lifted into the cerulean air.

And here you are today,
on the cover of the new issue of Rolling Stone:
black glasses, black shirt and black hair.

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Nice of you to drop by on this,
our last day at 51 West 68th Street.
I was just writing you a letter,
and was going to close by complaining
about how traumatic moving is.
By this time tomorrow,
we'll be living downtown.
I just finished reading your last interview.
Life's a bitch, but it's funny, ain't it?
I mean, with The Traveling Wilburys collaboration,
and a new album of your own
set for February release,
along with a planned tour to support it,
and you up and die.

I guess no matter how many times it comes,
success is always a little too early or too late.
But in your wisdom, and in the short, full range
of your emotional wilderness,
you looked at it differently:
one must continue to do what one must do,
though meaning and purpose might seem to vanish
20,000 Leagues Under The Sea.
Time barks, the rooster crows,
and both beliefs resurface
with nothing having changed
and everything further revealed.

I've got a lot to learn
about taking things in stride,
but as you said, I'm not alone anymore,
only terribly lonely.
Once again, thanks for stopping by.
If there's anything we can do for you,
just holler. If I get the chance,
and wind up upstairs some day,
I look forward to hearing you sing

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"Blue Lonely Dreams", that quintessential song
you spoke about writing in the interview.

Take care Roy, be well. I hope the girl
who is coming to pack the cartons
is mysterious and beautiful.
After all, death is out there somewhere,
squaring its shoulders, dancing the bolero
and growling like a tiger
lying among the reeds;
but too much has happened already,
and though not enough is never more,
an image can ease the pain.
I feel more for the stray kitten at the doorstep
than I fear death. The pitch of the wind ripping
through the reeds is a crescendo rising
interminably above the previous crescendo.
At the window, the sunshine is making the leaves shine.
The doorbell breaks my concentration,
and I open the door and all my hopes are realized.
On a day when it feels good to be alive
in an apartment that will be empty tomorrow,
and already in thought, was once ours,
the girl says she's not allergic to dust
as I sneeze and rejoice in the blood-stained minutes
that fall upon the white ocean,
that sink below the blue sea.

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Violets in Mapland

When winter is here, no one cares
how fate is exposed by your absence,
or how the place lacks for the missing color–
it's too cold to stare at the bare facts of nature.
Evenings are spent by cutting paper
until you return with a soft bang.
Your insistence, however, is a strong memory
whose vagrant log is a warmer eternity
until the advent of the next Ice Age. What a relief
when you reappear, as if the most wanted lover
had returned, or the fractured beat of your heart,
making its presence felt again, had left a morning
wake-up call to the flames of waning passion–
the burnt out filament of a light bulb.

Paradise must be kept in view
no matter how dismal the clock looks.
Your music is in my eyes, almost like
a comfortable temperature and humidity
that I can dress appropriately for.
The letter "A" is pasted into the scrapbook–
it represents a new beginning.
I'm as devoted to you as the summer wind is,
and could sit and look at you for hours on end.
And though the cat is colorblind and ignores you
as she chomps away on the fresh blades of grass,
I am voided and depicted over and over again
in the purple format of your travel route–
the momentary aberration, the clearly traced hope.

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Two Poems by Jerzy Jarniewicz

In Australia

on a certain December day in 1981
the front page of *The Sydney Tribune* said that
Mrs. Smith had found a snake in her garden

a snake in Australia's biggest city

horror descended on Sydney
fearful gardeners
started to search their little gardens

there was no need:
it was an ordinary snake
and did not lead to temptation

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A Fairy Tale

Your Majesty, Your Majesty, why have you such big eyes?

All the better to see you with—replies the King
and his eyes inspect Little Red Riding Hood from each wall of the room

slip under her skirt
look into her diary

Your Majesty, Your Majesty, why have you such big ears?

All the better to hear you with—replies the King
and his ears register the girl's night prayers
her talking in her sleep
and her argument yesterday with Jack

Your Majesty, Your Majesty, why have you such big teeth?

All the better to eat you with—replies the King
and all of a sudden assaults the girl
and the fairy tale transforms itself into history.

—translated from the Polish
by the author

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Across the Veld

Nadine Gordimer

The combis that, sending gusts of taped *reggae* and *mbaqanga* into the traffic, transport blacks back and forth between township and city, now carry a strange cargo of whites. The street committee in the black township has advised that this is the way to bring them in, the nature of the vehicles in themselves giving the signal to the people that these envoys from outside the siege are approved.

Through the white suburbs. Past bowling greens where figures like aged schoolboys and girls in banded hats genuflect over balls; past the Robin Hood fantasy of the archery club, the whoops of regular Sunday tennis partners in private gardens, the nylon frills and black suits of the congregation leaving a *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*, and the young girls with cupboards full of clothes who choose to stroll barefoot in jeans slashed off at the thigh. Past electronically-operated gates pinnacled with plaster eagles, spike and razor-wire-topped walls behind which fans of water open over flowers and birds sing. Sunday peace. If it were not for the combi owners' names and township addresses flourished on

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the vehicles, the convoy might be some sort of charity outing on its way to a picnic.

Mechanical knights visored in steel plating and chain-mailed in thick wire mesh barred the turnoff to the township. Before these vehicles were mounted police and soldiers standing, legs planted apart, with automatic rifles and machine guns.

To most of the white people in the combis, the yellow armored vans and brown armored cars, the stolid figures with the power of death in their hands were ranged like the toys of war children set up. Or it was as if someone suddenly flipped the switch of a program selector and a scene from some mini-series flashed on. Always, before, violence was so thin an appearance in the living room that the shadow of someone's head, moving across the room, was enough to blot it out. Now, why, it was there, you could see the freckles on a policeman's forearm. The armored vehicles the people dubbed "Hippos," the police, guns, were there. Alsatian dogs—once desirable and beautiful pets—were cowed and coiled in readiness to attack, weapons leashed in the fists of police handlers.

Everyone had been briefed: each combi had its marshal. Accept police provocation calmly, leave the talking to those appointed to do it. Lawyers and civil rights leaders among the group were conferring with comrades from within the township who had arrived to meet the convoy in an old American car lumbering low on its suspension. Others were negotiating with the police. They moved, as they argued, from one side of the roadblock to the other, as if literally pulled this way and that in the arena of their contention; a process in dumb show the people in the combis craned their necks to interpret. *. . . that policeman shaking his fist! Can't you see? Next to the Hippo. He hit him, he's hit him!*

No no no, nobody's been hurt!

But just look at those brutal clots, that one could press the trigger as easily as he's scratching himself . . .

Oh don't you worry, they'd think twice before firing at us—we're white.

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Alarm and giggling excitement died away into impatience and a new kind of boredom: was it possible to be bored while in an extraordinary situation? In one of the combis a lay nun in ankle socks offered round a plastic bottle of water, and there was a rustle of rolls of peppermints being peeled open. . . . *the difference is, if we were black we'd be singing.*

A young marshal raced up and down with her intercom. Everything about her was in agitation: long hair, breasts and rubber-thong sandals bobbing, swirling in contrast with the policemen planted at their posts. Harassed and grinning, she pulled herself up to the windows of each combi.

"They say we can't enter. But Allan and Dave have shown them the statute, it's not against the law, they can't stop us!"

She dropped and was off before questions reached her. People grabbled suppositions; in the silence of others was concealed disappointment—or relief. Who could tell from their faces? In a few minutes the girl was back again, running her openfingered hand to lift her hair high off her forehead.

"They say we'll be killed. We go in at our own risk."

She was fighting her own elation. She burst into laughter. People in the combi rose from their seats—but she was gone. Some climbed out of the combis and grouped in exchange of rumours and opinions, bravado and caution. The marshals ran like sheepdogs between them, getting them back inside. No one sat where they had sat before, everyone competed for attention, *I think, I said, I told* . . . And then the lawyers did the rounds. There was silence.

"We've decided to go in. The police will remove their block. The comrades are going to escort us—they'll be with us all the way. But anyone who feels that, because of family or any other circumstances, he or she should not ignore the police warning, should feel free to leave us now. There's transport for those who wish to return to town. Please. And no stigma whatever attached to this choice . . . I assure you. None of us will draw any wrong conclusions. So."

But it was not possible for anyone to find the courage to get up and leave; no fear equal to that. There was a moment like a breath held. And then, with all faces turned to him: "You're

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all coming?" And the company applauded; applauded each other; themselves. If they were never to meet again, each would have this moment of self-respect ratified between them. The armored vehicles, the police, guns, dogs, opened a way. The black drivers took their passengers where they had never been before, across the veld.

Hannah was in one of the combis. Of course, she had crossed the veld from cities, towns and dorps, many times before. It was her job, as monitor for a human rights organization, to keep contact with blacks. She sat quietly in the illusion sunglasses gave her that she was behind them in some kind of hide, able to think of what was most concealed, surely, among all the secret thoughts of the people around her—her anxiety over whether Sonny had evaded the police by choosing some other route into the township, and—most unimaginable of all, by those whose shoulders were touching hers—that the man who would speak to them during the ceremony at the graves was her lover. So the experience was for her unlike what it could be for anyone else. She had met police interference often before. If a policeman recognised her (she took off the sunglasses) among the collection of whites in the convoy he would know that the ex-political prisoner who was to take part in the blacks' "cleansing of the graves" ceremony was her lover. There was a crazy bond of confirmation in their eyes whenever hers met those of some plainclothes man.

The combi plunged into the township—into the valley where the township proliferated over three generations, and into the thick-layered human presence of Sunday, when all the life that is dispersed across the veld in the industrial areas and the city during the week has crammed back. Everyone home; at home in the streets, a habitation without barriers, the houses' breached walls spilling inmates, the tottering fences one with the components—tin, hubcaps, rotting boards—of the totemic rubbish mounds. Workers' dungarees were the flags hung out, drying spread cruciform with the logos of construction companies and soft drink plants stitched across them. Drumming at yard church-meetings thumped across

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the gibber of radio commercials and ragged singing from beer-drunks. The convoy pitched and tossed over the gulleys that were the streets and also the children's sand-pits, the fecal streams where dogs and pigs foraged.

An avenue of black faces looked into the windows, pressing close, so that the combis had to slow to these people's walking pace in order not to crush them under the wheels. No picnic party; the whites surrounded by, gazed at, gazing into the faces of these blacks who had stoned white drivers on a main road, who had taken control of this township out of the hands of white authority, who had refused to pay for the right to exist in the decaying ruins of the war against their presence too close across the veld; these people who killed police collaborators in their impotence to stop the police killing their children. One thing to read about these people, empathize with them, across the veld. Hannah, in her hide, felt the fear in her companions like a rise in temperature inside the vehicle. She slid open the window beside her. Instead of stones, black hands reached in, met and touched first hers and then those of all inside who reached out to them. The passengers jostled one another for the blessing of the hands, the healing touch. Some never saw the faces of those whose fingers they held for a moment before the combi's progress broke the grasp. From the crush outside there were the cries "AMANDLA! VIVA!," and joy when these were taken up by the whites. In the smiling haze of weekend drunks this procession of white people was part of the illusions that softened the realities of the week's labour and made the improbable appear possible. The crowd began to sing, of course, and *toi-toi* in a half-dance, half-procession alongside the convoy, bringing, among the raised fists of some in the combis, a kind of embarrassed papal or royal weighing-of-air-in-the-hand as a gracious response from some others.

At the graveyard Hannah saw him, Sonny, the detainee in his cell, the political personality, the gentle lover who was caressing her a few hours before—these personae were always present to her in the sight of him. He stood with his friend, Father Mayekiso, and some young white people from the End

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Conscription campaign. His curly black hair rose away from his head in the dusty wind. Moving over forgotten graves without looking where she was going, she stumbled on a broken plastic dome of paper flowers and was quickly caught and put on her feet by a black man in torn and dirty clothes. *Sorry, sorry.*

They were all around, those who had followed the convoy and those who were streaming down from all parts of the township to the graveyard. Smoke from the night's cooking fires hung its bitter incense over them. The old graves and leaning crosses were disappearing under the feet of the living. They stopped at nine fresh mounds. Hannah wanted to say—but only to him, over there with Father Mayekiso—"these aren't graves yet, not yet, it's too soon, they are beds, the shape of sleeping bodies with a soft cover of this red newly-turned earth drawn over their heads."

The young men down there were between fifteen and twenty-six years old. She did not know what to do with her emotion. She pulled some irises from the bunch she had brought and gave them out to people around her.

The blacks are accustomed to closeness. In queues for transport, for work permits, for housing allocation, for all the stamped papers that authorise their lives; loaded into overcrowded trains and buses to take them back and forth across the veld, fitting a family into one room, they cannot keep the outline of space—another, invisible skin—whites project around themselves, distanced from each other in everything but sexual and parental intimacy. But now in the graveyard the people from the combis were dispersed—parted from one another and the spatial aura they instinctively kept—and pressed into a single, vast, stirring being with the people of the township. The nun was close against the breast of a man. A black child, with his little naked penis waggling under a shirt, clung to the leg of a professor. A woman's French perfume and the sweat of a drunk merged as if one breath came from them. And yet it was not alarming for the whites; in fact, an old fear of closeness, of the odours and heat of other flesh, was gone. One ultimate body of bodies was inhaling and exhaling in the

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single systole and diastole that is life, and above was the freedom of the great open afternoon sky.

At a gesture from someone, whites turned heads: on the rise on the side of the graveyard opposite that of the township the whole force of police had reassembled. The yellow Casspirs and brown Hippos made an horizon, the mounted men before them, and, in front, the line on foot. But these were no longer standing stolidly as they did at the roadblock. They were half-crouched, their automatic rifles and machine guns pointing down straight at this body, the body of the gathering.

Blacks didn't bother to look. The police, mingled with army conscripts—from whom they were indistinguishable most of the time because they often wore the same camouflage outfits—had been camped on the township soccer fields for weeks. There was no getting away from them. They were everyday life; and death. They had shot the nine young men lying in the graves where the earth had not yet settled.

The priest led prayers in Sotho and hymns, banners of sound, were borne away over to the battle lines on the hill. One of the young white men who had refused conscription to join those up there and was ready to go to prison for this decision, told the gathering why white people had come to the people of the township.

We come to share your anger and sorrow at the killing of these, our brothers. We're here to show you that whites don't have to come to kill.

The interpreter's translation into the crowd's own language set off freedom songs again but the street committee comrades skillfully led a transition to hymns; the armed onlookers on the hill must not be provided with any pretext that this was a subversive gathering.

Hannah knew Sonny's speech. That is, she knew his thinking, his way of expressing a political line in his own way, distrustful of rhetoric even while he had to make some use of it. Part of his way had been arrived at and was always in development in his long dialogue with her, another part came from some source in him; as the sea is in human blood from the time when humans were creatures of some other element. She

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did not know him there in his old element, nor could he make himself known to her. He was perhaps even ashamed of this source as too un-informed and naïve, a coloured teacher in a small town, a husband and father; could not know that she observed it in him as a quality that drew her to him more than anything they shared. She kept for herself something she would never speak, not to anyone, certainly not to him: *He's a good man.*

Sonny was wearing the hand-dyed aubergine shirt she had given him and the rich colour accentuated his darkness—no one could say Sonny wasn't black enough to be a spokesman of the people, neither in terms of his skin nor his actions! When he spoke now of detentions and imprisonment, he had been there; when he spoke of the deaths of the nine young men by police brutality, he himself had risked such deaths in his own life. If he used the vocabulary of politics it was because certain words and phrases were codes everybody understood, no interpreters necessary, even in the English in which they were formulated they expanded in each individual's hearing to carry the meaning of his own frustrations, demands and desires.

Sonny did not adopt the usual mannerisms the vocabulary produces. He did not have a calculated histrionic way of standing or using his hands, when the eyes of a crowd were on him. When he paused on some rhetorical question, his intense, shining, troubled eyes would come, as if in ordinary conversation, to some individual for the response that would influence his own reflections. When he paused before expanding a point, he was unembarrassed by the moment he created, and would use a gesture, an aid to clarity of thought, that he would use in private discussion—maybe turning up his palm and tracing in it a circular movement with the thumb of the other hand. He also had a gift of spontaneity, drawing into his own discourse his response to previous speakers, so that what he said never seemed prepared in advance, but to have come to him from the vitality of the crowd before him.

Watching Sonny, listening to him, she felt at last she could define sincerity—it was not speaking from an *idea of oneself.*

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And frankness: frankness, something dangerous and beautiful. The subterfuges of an "illicit" love affair made the frankness of its emotions possible; the subterfuges of resistance made frankness in a lying society possible.

What is the meaning of the death of nine comrades we honour today? These young people and thousands of others who have been killed by apartheid's agents, the police, the army, the witdoeke, have sacrificed in the struggle their share of the future that the struggle is certainly going to win. They will never share with our people the country's wealth – instead of working to provide a minority with the highest standard of living in the world while the majority of the people cannot feed their children. They will never know what it is to get out of ghettos like this one and live where there is electricity and clean water in decent houses. They will never know the time to come when our sick will no longer lie on the floor in black hospitals while there are wards full of empty beds in hospitals for whites; when our fathers and mothers will no longer have to starve on pensions a tenth of those whites get. They'll never know that the migratory labour system, which now divides husbands and wives, parents and children, and has created the prostitutes, the glue-sniffing children in our streets and the spread of the terrible disease called AIDS, will be a horror of the past. They will never walk on our land, our land restored to us, instead of being sent away after the day's work to urban dumps like this and to rural slums in areas of our country given tribal names and called independent states. They have died without knowing freedom. They have died for freedom. Our freedom.*

We have heard from a young comrade who is not up there on the hill although he is white. The presence of white people here today is proof that the nine also died for their freedom. They died for the liberation of all the people of this country who want to see oppression destroyed and are ready to join the people's struggle to achieve this. That is the meaning of the death of the nine, for us.

* Vigilantes

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When such young men die it's usual to speak of a senseless death. There's anger that a life should be so short and brutally ended. Well, for those who shot and killed these nine young comrades last week, these really are senseless deaths, because this killing, and all the other tragic killings of our people, in the ghettos and in the prisons, will not stop us from winning our freedom. That is the message. That, for the oppressors, is the meaning of the deaths of the nine young comrades who lie buried here. These are senseless deaths because no amount of killing will mean that the oppression of our people can continue to survive.

How much of this blew over in the wind to the formation on the hill is not known, but the litany of freedom cries which interrupted Sonny at expected points (he was aware of the necessity for these signals . . .) certainly must have. Father Mayekiso's closing prayer did not, for a minute or two, quiet calls that still came from here and there. The amen stirred deeply through the crowd, a swarming hum that seemed to sway them towards the graves. The comrades held them back; there was silence. Gusts of wind sculpted the soft earth mounds. The silence came from there, down there outside time, so that Hannah did not know if it lasted seconds or minutes, only that for its strange duration she had no awareness of Sonny, he did not exist in it. And then the nun came forward and knelt on the earth, laying a flower. A straggling queue shuffled past the nine mounds with their new bright tin numbers. Hannah's blue irises were laid by many hands. Small children kept them as gifts for themselves. Soon the mounds were transformed by a disguise of the lovely temporal; colours and fragrance, and petals that would not last. She saw Sonny again. He was delivering to the dead a rose he had told her, when they parted in the city, his daughter had entrusted to him. In a sideways glance with only a few feet between them they acknowledged each other across the graves like people who cannot put a name to a face.

The crowd began to thin at the edges, slowly turned away from the graves. The children were running with the treasure of their single flowers. The young people were singing, *We*

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greet you, Mandela, call us Mandela . . . in the rhythm of a walking song, gently harmonising rather than rousing, parting from the dead with respect. Hannah and the other whites took their pace, flowing with people, people flowing past, life draining out of the graveyard. Somewhere behind, Sonny, Father Mayekiso—the official group—were waylaid by members of the street committee and crones and drunks who wanted to take their hands to receive the vague benediction believed to emanate from important people. Then a kind of seismic tremor went through the trooping crowd. There was no shout, but everybody began to bump into everybody else; some had stopped abruptly: up there, from the hill the police with the pointing rifles were racing down upon them. The broad swathe of people broke into a hobbling run from which the young surged out ahead. As people ran, they pulled rags from somewhere in their clothing, doeks from their heads, and tied them across noses and mouths. The white people trotted embarrassedly, bewildered: they were not used to having to flee anything or anyone, some foolish idea of dignity, some armchair idea of courage, inhibited them. Even Hannah had never before experienced what the blacks, with their rags kept on their persons as protection against tear gas as white people carry credit cards, were ready for every day. Canisters were exploding at the tail of the crowd; the foul cloud pursued them and a shot—in the air, perhaps triggered only by the scramble of the police through trash and bushes—cracked a whip over them. Hannah was young and her strong freckled legs could carry her fast, but an agonising brake of resistance fought against the instinct. She wanted to stop her legs; she stopped and ran, stopped and ran, crashing into the path of others, looking back, looking everywhere. Now there was a scream; the police had plunged down into the crowd, long wails of terror were cut through by the dry syllables of shots, a sound hard as the steel that makes for flesh and bone, goes to the throat where the yell rises. She was running back, sideways, thrust aside, sometimes clutched by someone determinedly making a way, she caught a whiff of the gas, the wind had blown it back to the hill, her eyes were streaming, and there he was,

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there was Sonny, his shiny black curls, the bar of his eyebrows above desperate eyes like black holes in his head. He gripped her arm so that it was almost wrenched out of its socket; she thought she was weeping at the sight of Sonny, the tear-gas tears were something else. "Get to the combi! Get to the combi! Go!" She pulled against leaving him, he pushed her; and amid shots and screams he began to run with her, run as if he were chained to her. The people were racing and flying into their street-burrows in the township; from there came the stare of hundreds of people gathered on walls, on rooftops, afar, their silence a tumultous surge of lament. Mayekiso appeared, level with Sonny and Hannah. His arms were raised, he was shouting, intoning in his own language; but the people tore past the crucified one's representative in their midst, nothing could cast out their fear. There was a shot like all the other shots: but this time a young man fell face-down in the path of Sonny, Hannah and Father Mayekiso. People shrieked and backed off, struggling to get away from the target; a single woman dropped to her knees at the body's side, calling out, tugging to turn the man over. Blood came glistening through the black fibrous mat of his hair as she moved him, and ran, obliterating the slogan on his trade union t-shirt AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL. Buffetted on all sides, Sonny and Hannah were dragged on, managed to stand, turned to fight—in driven instinct—their way back to where the man lay. Mayekiso was with him, the woman was hysterically beating the ground. They saw this one second and the next it was out of sight behind the press of fleeing people, appeared again, disappeared. They were forcing their way against shoulders, backsides, flailing arms, and now there were shots smashing right past their heads. Sonny suddenly was looking at her as if he were making a terrible discovery. His face was distorted by anguish and incoherence. He pressed down her head with his raised arm and they ran, ran away with the crowd.

In Sonny's car, Hannah sat and gasped, tears trickling from her nose. "The others'll be looking for me . . . combi won't go without me."

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"The drivers saw you. They'll tell them you left with someone else."

"I'm afraid they'll think something happened to me." He rested his forehead on his hands, against the steering wheel a moment. Then recovered himself.

"Nothing's happened to you, Hannah."

Her hand was squeezed bloodless where it had been in his clutch. She was sure, as lovers imagine at such times, that she would relive the sensation of his grasp to the end of her life.

But it was he who was never to be able to forget that he ran away that day, for the first time in his life; with her, because of her.

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William Logan

Florida Pest Control

The blonde unlocks
her daddy's Firebird,
blood-red as a tropical fish.
Privilege, that old bete noire,

shakes its head in her exhaust.
Her rear lights swim
in a fantail's glide.
The South exists,

I write my liberal friends,
with its wage slaves
and Burger King estates,
in burning, frivolous pastels.

No one can dream it away,
though plasma centers drain
the blood of black and white,
our ball and chain.

The houses turn to dust
beneath us, gnawed by termite,
beetle, or the fear of God.
Only the last can't be exterminated.

Down the street Christo's men
sheathe a house in red plastic
and pump three days of poison in.
Last year two hapless thieves

broke a lock and wandered through
a termite-ridden house in Tallahassee.
They choked to death
in twenty minutes. Christ!

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Joseph Lease

Crystal Rock

1.

The sun drills a hole between my shoulder blades
I am ashamed that I want self-degrading things
I burn for no reason like a lantern in daylight

Do I believe in evil?
To commit a sin you have to intend
To commit a sin

The pleasures that I need contradict each other

Weeds and grass stab through flat shining water
When I step on them to cross the black mud
The cold water shakes, distorting flat branches

My back muscles pull tight
Like string being tied in a knot
Come here and pull me
Tighter and tighter

2.

Snow covers the slope
and long ice patches stick out
where the stream has frozen.
The ice looks almost blue.
Branches balance
against one another
to form structures

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resembling walls or huts.
In the cold we hear the
wind start in the pines.
One footstep will be
padded by the snow,
the next will crunch
and pack the snow hard.
When I slide my fingers
over your fingers
I feel time—
more than four years
since I first stroked your hand.
We feel so much pleasure
that I'm afraid.
The sky is oatmeal colored,
thick and near.
Beige-yellow leaves,
curled into spirals,
clatter on twigs
in the cold wind.
At Crystal Rock,
with the fields and barns
spread beneath us,
we press the pine needles
against our cheeks.

3.

I reach straight up like an oak tree
heat flows in the strong branch
the moon shines in the freezing sky
the moon shines on the branch

need breathing need

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in my stomach
there is
a chunk of agate
the motion rushing forward
in your stomach
slams you into me

wide open
without pain
every nerve in your body pulses
open yet still
opening

sun heat is pulsing inside you
you bump against the branch
your hand reaches, cups the moon
shining on the tight branch

ride the sun inside the branch
create me and teach me
you feed me from your big, full
churning smile

ride the sun inside the branch
moving your whole body
back and forth squeezing heat

I breathe like an oak tree
I taste your sweating skin
in my mouth and your sweat
moistens my eyes with heat

knowledge shines in your voice; knowledge
pushes your rhythm

we laugh in the dark

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each of us sets the rhythm
urging the other on
each of us takes pleasure

I reach straight up like an oak tree
heat flows in the strong branch
the moon shines in the freezing sky
the moon shines on the branch

sun heat is pulsing inside you
moving your whole body;
you squeeze the pulsing heat

your moist hair and your skin
smell like the earth during rain
sun heat is pulsing inside you
here is the river in the sun

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Gerrit Henry

"The Watchers"

I am looking at a movie
In which the monster is
Never seen—so far.
Human remains, however,
Are flagrantly on view.
Three school chums,
On their bicycles, in the
Woods, are set upon by fur
and fang; the fat boy's
Glasses, dropping to
The ground, drip scarlet.
A lady cop dies
Electrocuted against
A giant fuse box,
Her body jerking
Lustily to the rhythm
Of shooting sparks.
A school janitor
Screams and heaves,
Impaled on a rail.
All of them lose
their eyes—bloody
Sockets smile
Where iris and cornea
Should gleam.

What exactly is
This movie about?
Man's bestiality to man?
The secret sharer?
And why no monster?

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We should at least
Have the satisfaction
Of seeing this grisly
Evil; at least get
A closer look at this thing
Which guts and assails,
Who tears and violently
Probes, to wholly denude
Human beings, mere human
Beings of flesh and bone.

The mother is
an actress I've
Seen before; I can't
Place her.
No, she isn't.
The mother has just told
Son Corey Haim
"We're in this together."

Unfortunately, so are
We all. Sure, I get
A bang—probably of
Nefarious origin—out of
Watching horror movies
On my video recorder.
I'm always on the
Lookout for one or two
At my local video shop,
A few blocks down Broadway.

But as sure as I'm sitting
Here, talking to you—for
I can no longer bear,
One way or the other,
To watch "The Watchers"—
As sure as I sit here,
Typing along to

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The Wagnerian background
Music, tired, nonplussed,
Disgusted, alive—I
Am shocked by the turns
This flick is taking, as it
Veers its way mindlessly
To some probably horrendous
Climax. I am
Shocked and outraged

By the sheer ugliness
Of it all, with its standard
Technicolor hues and
Substandard characters
And plots; its visual
Effronteries; its
Moral penury;
Its meanness—a mother
Unwillingly deprived of
Her child. Will I turn it
Off? Probably, no.
I am lonely. And, in some

Subtle, subterranean way,
The movie gives me courage,
Just by its viciousness.
It is a presence—like it
Or not—in my warm apartment.
It gives me the courage
To sit down and turn
To my typewriter,
And write you, and me,
An alternative,
Write away the horror,
Write away the blood,
The inevitable, quick progression
Of another American night.

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Laurence Breiner

Sonettina: At the Murano Glassworks

You see a bright ship
with a flourish of little banners
formed in one single gesture
deft as a glance.

Frail yards hold the rigging
tense with seaworthiness
all, tackle and timber,
fixed in a sea of glass

mingled with fire.
So steadfast, so imperilled
love presents itself.

Only let in some air;
a little bitter ash,
the rest all flame.

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Portfolio

Joke Paintings

Richard Prince

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A husband came home and found his wife in bed with his best friend. "Hey! What do you think you're doing?", said the husband

"See?", she said to the man beside her. I told you he was stupid."

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"I understand your husband drowned and left you two million dollars. Can you imagine, two million dollars, and he couldn't even read or write."

"Yeah, she said, and he couldn't swim either."

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Fireman pulling drunk out of a burning bed: You darned fool, that'll teach you to smoke in bed.
Drunk: I wasn't smoking in bed, it was on fire when I laid down.

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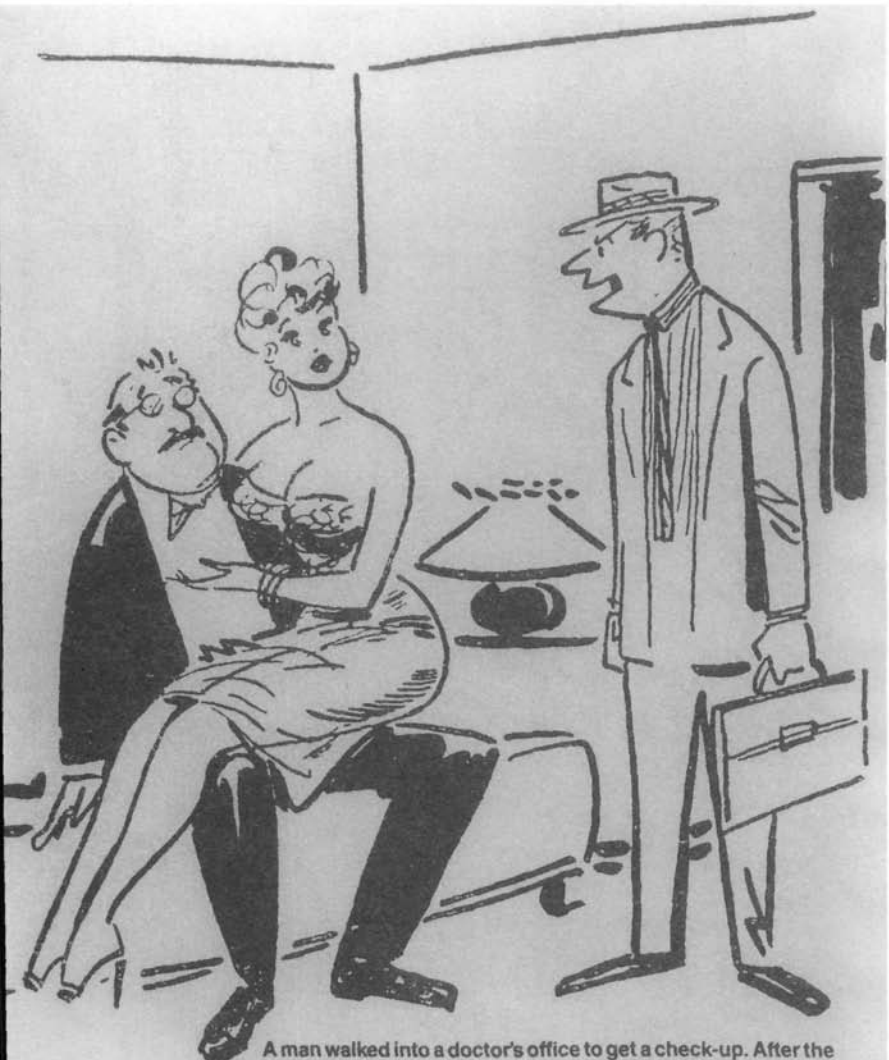

A man walked into a doctor's office to get a check-up. After the examination the Doctor said, "I've got good news and I've got bad news. The bad news is that your going to die in a year and there's nothing that can be done about it. The good news is that I'm having an affair with my new secretary.

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A traveling salesman's car broke down on a lonely road late at nite in the middle of nowhere. He walked to the nearest farmhouse and asked the farmer if he could stay the night. "No," said the farmer and then shot the salesman in the head with a shotgun.

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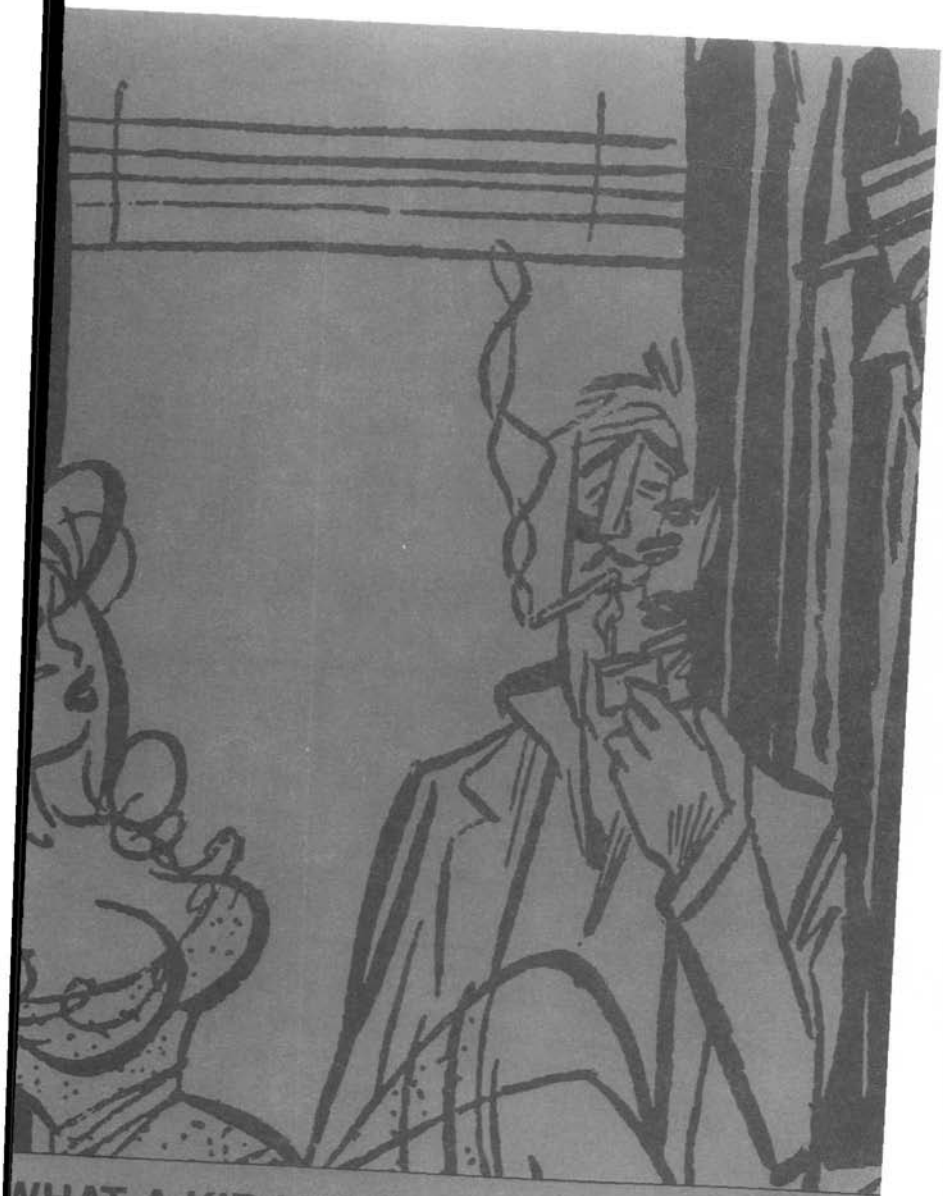
WHAT A KID I WAS.
remember practicing the violin in front
of a roaring fire. My old man walked in.
He was furious. We didn't have a fireplace

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CARLOS - O sobrenome nunca soube.

YAN - Não me faz entrar?

CARLOS - Desculpe. Entre. É que a surpresa foi muito grande.

YAN - Há vinte anos que você não me vê. Mas eu já te vi. Cantando em Nova York, Paris, em Buenos Aires mesmo.

CARLOS - E nunca veio me dar um alô.

YAN - Eu não tinha coragem... Mas nesta noite de fim de ano... com todo mundo fazendo loucuras, até você. Não foi?

CARLOS - (interrompendo) Você está linda.

YAN - Obrigada.

~~CARLOS -~~ Senta aqui. Me conta, onde está morando?

YAN - Viajo muito. Mas minha casa é aqui mesmo, em Montecarlo. Não me casei com um milionário, como alguns dizem. Só tive foi sorte nos negócios.

CARLOS - Valparaíso.

YAN - Mas é uma história chata. Só de cifras, bons investimentos, só. De você, ~~porém~~, eu sei tudo. ~~Tenho seguido sua carreira desde que começou a gravar discos~~. A tua glória não me surpreendeu. Eu sempre soube disso.

CARLOS - É mesmo?

YAN - Sim. Você tinha o sucesso ~~escrito~~ na testa.

CARLOS - ~~Pelo~~ ~~seriamente~~?

YAN - Você ~~era, e continua sendo, alguém que dá certo em tudo. Porque tem talento... e a outra coisa.~~

~~CARLOS - Que outra coisa?~~

~~YAN - É difícil explicar. Você não somente acreditava na sua música... e a amava. Você acreditava nas pessoas, amava elas.~~

~~CARLOS - É isso que achava de mim?~~

~~YAN - E pelas suas últimas músicas, eu sinto que você sempre ficou assim, no fundo... apesar do sucesso... além de toda a vaidade.~~

CARLOS - ~~Yankele~~... Posso chamá-la assim?

YAN - Por favor...

~~CARLOS - Yankele... você falou que eu acreditava nas pessoas. O que quer dizer com isso? porque eu... não acredito em ninguém. Pelo menos agora.~~

A manuscript page from Manuel Puig's Gardel, *a play about tango singer Carlos Gardel.*

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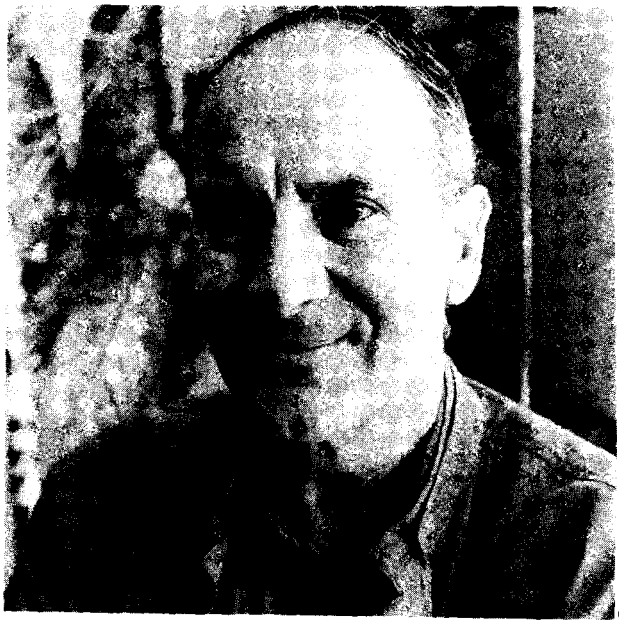

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The Art of Fiction CXIV
Manuel Puig

Readers of Argentine writer Manuel Puig have come to expect certain constants from this highly versatile novelist: innovative narrative techniques, dark comedy, and a preoccupation with the effects of popular culture, particularly film, on the human spirit. He was born in 1932 in General Villegas, a small town on the Argentine pampas, and began studying English at the age of ten in order to better understand the American movies he saw every afternoon with his mother. In 1946 he went to Buenos Aires to an American boarding school and then to the University of Buenos Aires, where his interests expanded to include literature, psychology and philosophy.

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But his primary ambition was to direct films. In 1955 he went to film school in Italy on a scholarship. The school proved to be a disappointment; he left Italy and traveled to Paris and London, working on screenplays and supporting himself as a language teacher and dishwasher. Puig then returned to the Americas, going first to Buenos Aires and later to New York, and began writing fiction. His first novel, Betrayed by Rita Hayworth, *an autobiographical account of his provincial childhood, was published in Buenos Aires in 1968.*

Over the next twenty years, Puig lived in Mexico City, Buenos Aires, New York and Rio de Janeiro and wrote seven more novels: Heartbreak Tango *(1969);* The Buenos Aires Affair *(1973);* The Kiss of the Spider Woman *(1976);* Pubis Angelical *(1979);* Eternal Curse on the Reader of These Pages *(1980);* Blood of Requited Love *(1982); and* Cae la noche tropical *(1988) which has not been published yet in English. Puig's early passion for the movies is evident both in his narrative style, which relies heavily on dialogue, and in the lives of his characters, where the glamorous and idealized world of films serves as a counterpoint to their own disappointments.*

Puig has lived very little of his adult life in Argentina, but all of his novels, with the exception of Blood of Requited Love, *are about Argentina or Argentines coping with exile. When we met in Puig's home in Rio de Janeiro, I was struck by his very Argentine manner: a grave courtesy and reserve which set him apart from the more free-wheeling Brazilians. He is slender, with a handsome, tanned face and expressive dark eyes. He doesn't care much for interviews, but he did agree to three meetings at six-month intervals. The first he agreed to on the condition that we confine it to a morning's conversation. The morning in question was a cool, rainy Saturday in May, 1988. We sat on comfortable sofas at one end of a pleasant living room with a polished tile floor, many plants, and a poster of Argentine tango idol Carlos Gardel on one whitewashed wall. The interview began somewhat formally in Spanish, and loosened up a bit when we switched to English. As we talked, I saw why it was that interviews exhausted him: he is attentive, thoroughly engaged, and careful about choosing precisely the*

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word he wants, even in a foreign language. When he hits upon it, his face lights up.

INTERVIEWER

What is the difference between movie and book material?

MANUEL PUIG

In my experience, an epic story translates very well into film. Realistic novels—the kind made up of small details and constructed using a certain analytical approach—don't make good films. Films are synthesis. Everyday grayness, everyday realism is especially tough to translate to the screen. I remember discussing this once with a filmmaker, who said, "Yes, but look at the realistic films the Italians made, such as De Sica's *Umberto D.*" I disagreed. There's nothing of everyday grayness in *Umberto D*—it's about suicide, about deciding whether to kill yourself or not. It's an epic film *disguised* as an everyday realistic one. What I like to do in my novels is to show the complexity of everyday life; the subtexture of social tensions and the pressures behind each little act of ours. That's very difficult to put into film. I feel much more comfortable with films dealing with allegorical, larger-than-life characters and stylized situations.

INTERVIEWER

Is that why you liked American films of the 1940s?

PUIG

Sure. They were dreams, totally stylized—the perfect stuff of films because dreams allow you the possibility of a synthetic approach.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever found that the dialogue of those 1940s films helped with fictional dialogue?

PUIG

I learned certain rules of story-telling from the films of that

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time. Mainly how to distribute the intrigue. But what interests me more about those films is examining the effect they had on people.

INTERVIEWER

On the people you grew up with?

PUIG

Well, yes—on my characters. My characters have all been affected by those cinematic dreams. In those days, movies were very important to people. They were their Mount Olympus. The stars were deities.

INTERVIEWER

Obviously you were intrigued by movies as a child. What about books?

PUIG

One of the very first books I read was André Gide's *Pastoral Symphony*. In 1947 he won the Nobel Prize. At the same time a film had been made of the novel, so he had come into the territory of my immediate interest, which was, of course, film. I read the novel and was immensely impressed. Soon after, I remember being impressed by Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*. Such contrasting authors—Gide all measure and economy, and Faulkner sprawling all over the place.

INTERVIEWER

Did you read *The Wild Palms* in English?

PUIG

No, I read Borges's Spanish translation, which is a beautiful work. I read Faulkner's other books in English. I never went back to *The Wild Palms*, but for me it's always an example of intuitive writing.

INTERVIEWER

So a writer's imagination is either calculated or intuitive?

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PUIG

It goes from one extreme to the other. In between you have all these shadings. I have trouble reading fiction these days. So I've lost that immense realm of pleasure. Thank God I still enjoy movies and plays.

INTERVIEWER

You mean you don't read *any* fiction now?

PUIG

Writing has spoiled the pleasure of reading for me, because I can't read innocently. If you are an innocent reader, you accept the fantasy of others; you accept their style. These days another writer's problems of style immediately recall my own stylistic problems. If I read fiction, I'm working; I'm not relaxing. My only sector of interest now is biographies. Those I read with great relish, because the facts are real and there is no pretense of style.

INTERVIEWER

Even your later novels are concerned with 1940s films. Do you ever go to contemporary movies?

PUIG

Rarely. I simply got tired of walking out in the middle. It's a pity, because I know I may be missing some good things, but the price of viewing hours and hours of trash is too high. Of course, I receive films from all over the world—very strange films from Barcelona, Rome, Los Angeles, London. I barely have time to see *them*.

INTERVIEWER

People send them to you because they know you like old movies?

PUIG

Yes, I've established a network. There are many like me who are interested in certain periods and nationalities. For in-

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stance, I'm extremely interested in Mexican films from the forties and fifties. The world doesn't know what it's missing. There is a very silly prejudice against certain movie nationalities, so many films are simply discarded, though they're gems. In fact, I think the best Latin American films come from Mexico, at least from that very particular period. From a sociological point of view, the Argentine films are also of interest to me.

INTERVIEWER

There isn't much news from Argentina in the Brazilian papers. I wonder if you feel as remote here, in a neighboring country, as you might in Mexico or New York.

PUIG

New York is totally removed. Mexico feels closer.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find it easy to adapt yourself to different cultures?

PUIG

I learn languages easily, except German. My experience in Rome, New York, and Mexico was that you have to either integrate yourself or leave. For me there's always this desire to belong and become part of the country. Here in Brazil I had a very bad experience with the literary establishment and at the same time a very positive one on the human side.

INTERVIEWER

What was the bad experience?

PUIG

I published a book with a Brazilian setting called *Blood of Requited Love*; the literary establishment here decided to ignore it, as if it hadn't even been published.

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INTERVIEWER

Wasn't the Josemar character in the novel a carpenter who worked on your house?

PUIG

There are very few words in the book that are not his. I simply edited our conversations. Mainly my job was to bring all the material out of him, put him in a mood to talk and express himself.

INTERVIEWER

Did he ever read the book?

PUIG

He barely reads. It was odd because he received a huge amount of money. He made more money on that book than I did. I thought it was going to be a big success—here, especially—so we made a fifty-fifty arrangement. But then he preferred to get a fixed amount and with that he bought himself a new house. It was ironic, because his tale was about the loss of a house; by telling it he got a new and better house. I felt very good about all this. Not only had I written a new novel, but I had helped someone. I expected gratitude, at least to inspire a warm feeling. But it wasn't the case.

INTERVIEWER

He felt burdened by your help?

PUIG

He tried to blackmail me. After the book was published, he said he'd had threats against his life and had had to give people money. I reminded him of the contract, which said that he was responsible for any references made to living persons. I had changed the names of the people and places, there was no publicity about his identity. That was enough to dissuade him. What he'd said was all lies. If it had been true, he would

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have come to me in despair. Thank God I had a very good contract. I was really appalled. The fact of telling me the story, of unburdening himself, was already positive for him. What's more, I paid him per hour while he was talking.

INTERVIEWER

The reverse of psychoanalysis.

PUIG

Yes. And on top of it all he got a house, which was so symbolic of all he had lost. The book is really about the loss of a father, so similar to my own *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*. I felt terribly identified with him. I always write about people who somehow reflect my problems. In general they are similar to me, though I make many changes. In this case, the guy was Brazilian, not Argentine. He was thirty, not fifty. He was extremely strong and handsome; I am not. He has fantastic health, which I don't have. He was illiterate; I was supposed to be a writer. He doesn't question machismo, while machismo for me is the basic question of my existence. What we shared was this father problem—a ghost of a father. By the end there was such a brotherhood between us. It came to nothing as far as human relations go, but I'm very glad it happened because the novel has a certain interest; and I'm glad because I helped him.

INTERVIEWER

Was the process of writing that novel different from that of your other books?

PUIG

Very much so. I'd never worked with a tape recorder. With *Eternal Curse on the Reader of These Pages* there was also a real character present, but the writing process was different. I created a character myself—the old man Ramirez—so I could establish a dialogue with him. I didn't have much trouble

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feeling and imagining myself as Ramirez, because in 1978 and 1979, when I was working on the book, I was going through a very dark period.

INTERVIEWER

So you wrote the novel from the dialogue that was going on between the two of you as one between Ramirez and this other person.

PUIG

We practically wrote it together. He was beside me the whole time; it was a sort of psychodrama typed as it happened.

INTERVIEWER

Using this extraordinary method, how do you control your material?

PUIG

If you know a character—as much as it's possible to know another—and you put that person into a certain circumstance, you should be able to predict the reaction, especially the verbal reaction.

INTERVIEWER

Doesn't the book take all sorts of unexpected turns?

PUIG

It should be the opposite. It should be a situation where, well, I know all about them and I can probably guess what their reactions would be in a given situation. So it's just a matter of watching. But of course, they are delicate relationships. You cannot impose anything on characters. They help you, they give you all, but you have to respect them.

INTERVIEWER

So you get to know your characters and then turn them loose.

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PUIG

You should be able to put a character in a situation that never happened in real life and predict what that character would have done or said.

INTERVIEWER

What if a person you're interviewing says or does something different from what you had in mind?

PUIG

Both in *Blood of Requited Love* and *Eternal Curse on the Reader of These Pages* I didn't have anything that the characters hadn't said. Of course, I did my own weaving. The yarn is presented by the characters and I work with that.

INTERVIEWER

What most writers like about fiction is the idea of making up characters and having them do whatever they want.

PUIG

Oh, no, no, no, no. I try to respect my characters. If you know them well, you won't make them do any nonsense.

INTERVIEWER

If you're reproducing real conversation verbatim, what is the difference between this kind of fiction and . . . well, documenting?

PUIG

My characters' ways of thinking and talking have their musical and pictorial qualities. I take these qualities and I do my own embroidery. In aesthetic terms, a writer can use any method he wants. What counts, and what makes it fiction, is how it's done. The writer who uses the third person in his fiction is using an orthodox, established method or code. I am interested in the individual kinds of speech, however flawed and limited, of real people. That may limit me, but the use

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the writer makes of whatever method is limited only by his talent.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of characters do you pick as these "collaborators"?

PUIG

I can only tell a story about a character who reflects my most burning problems. I believe in characters as vehicles of exposition. Their voices are full of hidden clues, and I like to listen to them. That's why I work so much with dialogue. What they *don't* say sometimes expresses more than what they *do* say. Mine is not the classic third-person voice.

INTERVIEWER

Obviously you have to edit them.

PUIG

In my novels I try to reproduce everyday language. Of course, there's a certain concern about length. You can't have people expounding on themselves forever in novels the way they do in real life.

INTERVIEWER

Is it easier to write in the first person?

PUIG

Yes. When I deal with first-person dialogue and I know the character well, it's just a matter of lending an ear.

INTERVIEWER

You prefer not to have the novelist in the novel?

PUIG

I'm not interested in listening to my voice that much. I have no ego.

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INTERVIEWER

But the voice of Manuel Puig is always there.

PUIG

My view of things comes out in the long run, let's hope. I remember at the beginning of my career a very nasty established writer said, "Oh, I know how Manuel Puig's characters talk but how does *he* talk? He doesn't have a persona." I thought the world of movies and acting provided the pure height of vanity, but I was mistaken.

INTERVIEWER

There's a lot of jealousy among writers.

PUIG

They're supposed to be people with more insight and distance, but it's not always the case.

INTERVIEWER

In some of your novels, particularly *The Buenos Aires Affair,* it seems as though people live in an artistic world because they can't live in the day-to-day world. Do you ever yearn for a life that has nothing to do with art?

PUIG

It's not a solution. With that book I meant to suggest there are other sources of energy and strength. But a life totally devoid of the imagination would be very boring.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think fiction can show people how to live?

PUIG

Direct experience is best, but then you'd need a thousand lifetimes. Books have that wonderful quality of showing you other lives. They can be a great nourishment.

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INTERVIEWER

What are the easiest and hardest parts of writing for you?

PUIG

The beginning is exciting because I get an idea. Then I start looking for the shape to use to present it. The content always comes from the form, in my case. I think it should be like that, but I know other writers work differently. Then comes the critical moment, when I look for the voices of the narrators. Sometimes it's easy; sometimes not. If I find the narrator quickly, that's great, but it doesn't always happen that way. I have to find a voice that convinces me, and that's very difficult. Only when I believe in the narrator does it fall into place. Actually, the hardest part of writing for me is the typing and tidying things up. I don't dare try a word processor. I find it useful to type the different drafts—going from the rough draft to the second. As you're typing a clean copy you make decisions. I have been writing novels for almost thirty years, and I'm used to a certain technique of polishing. I've been told, "Try that machine, that processor, you'll love it." But not yet. Maybe next time. I like to keep track of the first draft. I like to see the scratching in ink. I do a lot of scratching.

INTERVIEWER

Are your revisions very radical?

PUIG

It depends. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* had almost no corrections. I wrote that novel with the greatest ease. *The Buenos Aires Affair* and *Pubis Angelical* were the toughest, because there were many changes in narrators. The last one, *Cae la noche tropical,* came out quite easily.

INTERVIEWER

How much of the book do you have in mind before you start?

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PUIG

Most of it. But with this last novel, something very peculiar happened. I was shaping it, working on a real character—Ferreira in the book—but then he just disappeared. I couldn't get all the information I needed from him. So somehow another interesting person—actually someone I was considering for another story—came into the picture. I thought perhaps I could shift him into this novel. Absolutely accidental. But then *he* disappeared. It was very, very strange. Both were people in the neighborhood whom I could talk to and both of them disappeared. But that gave the final shape to the novel. The fact that they would disappear was essential. It was their nature. At a certain point they couldn't take the responsibility and they would leave. So it was reality, absolutely dictating the course of the novel. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before. But it wasn't a problem; it turned out to be an advantage.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that people are determined by their circumstances?

PUIG

This is the awful thing: we are all *so* determined by our culture. Mainly because we learn to play roles. For me it starts with the very unnatural and hideous sexual roles. I think that sex is totally banal, devoid of any moral meaning or weight. It's just fun and games, innocence itself. But at a certain point somebody decided that sex has a moral weight. A patriarch invented the concept of sexual sin to distinguish between the saintly woman at home and the prostitute on the street.

INTERVIEWER

And men have a very different morality applied to them?

PUIG

Men are subject to no morality! A man full of sexual energy is a stallion, a model of health. A woman with strong sexual needs, up to a certain time ago, was considered a victim of her

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glands. She was not trusted, because it was thought that if she had sex so easily there must be something wrong with her, physically and mentally. The minute sex becomes of moral importance, horrible problems are created needlessly. The principle of sex is pleasure, that's all. I consider sex to be an act of the vegetative life, vegetative in the sense of eating and sleeping. Sex is as important as eating or sleeping but as devoid of moral meaning.

INTERVIEWER

At the end of *Pubis Angelical*, when Ana realizes she's sexless, like an angel, she begins thinking about the people whom she loves. It seems like you're saying that once people get over sex they can begin to love each other.

PUIG

Yes, once that problem is settled—or you don't imagine it as a problem. Once you've eliminated sex as a means of superiority or inferiority, sex is of no meaning.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think eliminating sex roles is possible in this world?

PUIG

At this moment, it's only a utopian ideal. But I see it as the only answer. The changes since 1968 point to that. You're very young; you don't know what this world was like in the forties. I remember very intelligent women saying strange things such as, "I cannot enjoy sex unless I fear a little the man who embraces me." There was all this myth of the macho superiority.

INTERVIEWER

Both sexes accepted it.

PUIG

Since you learned to enjoy sex that way, as an act of possession, it was something you wouldn't argue with. The general belief is that it was an unfair situation for women, but a natural

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one. If you went against it, you were unnatural. A woman had to be soft and surrender, and that way she would achieve pleasure. Afterwards, with experience, she would begin to find something phony in all this. So then she'd try to get even in some other way. We are so immersed in sexual repression, it's impossible to think of a world without it—but it will come.

INTERVIEWER

In *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*, there is a little utopia created under dire circumstances in the prison cell. Did you feel that Molina and Valentin transcended their traditional roles?

PUIG

It happens. I'm not just fantasizing; what I know comes from experience.

INTERVIEWER

If you weren't a writer, could you imagine yourself in another occupation?

PUIG

Something I'd enjoy? I'd like to sing, but I have no voice. Or maybe play an instrument. I'd enjoy anything creative. I wasn't bad at drawing, but I never developed it.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you become a writer? Do you feel it's something you need to do?

PUIG

For me it was a blessing. At first, I thought films were my thing, but I didn't like the work on the set and collaborating with lots of people. So I decided to write film scripts. I never sold them; they were training, pre-literary practice. Later when I finally started writing novels I found them to be the great solution—because what I'd wanted to do all along was to tell stories. With images, or with words, it didn't matter;

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I like to recreate reality in order to understand it better. But writing was something I could do on my own. I could do all the revisions I wanted and without the pressures of budgets. I could make a living out of it, and also it was an enjoyable activity. Of course, there are the secondary aspects which are a little bothersome.

INTERVIEWER

Like being interviewed?

PUIG

Well, more or less. Even worse is the accounting, dealing with the publishers, all that. But what's really a bore and downright unpleasant is the relationship with the critics. They can be very irresponsible people. There are exceptions, but few. I've been rescued in a way by the colleges. There you find a different attitude. But it comes much later; when you've just published a book, what you feel immediately is the contact with the press.

INTERVIEWER

Universities don't pick up books for several years.

PUIG

No, and their reaction doesn't have much impact. But it's wonderful to know that somebody accepts your work. The reviewers from newspapers and magazines just want to amuse the person who buys the paper. They do it at the expense of the authors. Many, many times it's dishonest as well, because the critics belong to groups that don't like you—it's a horror. I'm published in twenty-four different languages, so I know critics. In Spanish I have to deal with the attitudes of the Mexicans, of the Argentines, of the Chileans. Each Spanish-speaking country has a special syndrome. I don't find it stimulating at all.

INTERVIEWER

Do you worry much about this?

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PUIG

Well, critics have power, unfortunately. With time the book will outlive anything. But they have the power to retard it a lot. I've had a very bad relationship with the critics. I don't have to say thank you to them.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that writing is something that can be taught?

PUIG

No, but you can discuss it. What I did when I taught at City College and at Columbia University was to discuss my own experiences and then suggest exercises. I don't like to go into a classroom and sit and listen to somebody reading.

INTERVIEWER

Did teaching help your writing at all?

PUIG

It always does, because you're always discussing the questions that plague you.

INTERVIEWER

What was it like for you to teach Americans?

PUIG

I found it interesting because I could see what their phobias, fears and problems were. I've found that in both America and Latin America, the young writer usually doesn't like the system, with a capital "S," in his country. But in Latin America the possibility exists of actually shaking that system, because Latin American systems are shaky. Young writers who don't like the American way of life feel impotent, because it's really tough to shake Wall Street. You may not like Wall Street, but it works somehow. That's also the case in countries like Germany. Ironically, Latin American countries, in their instability, give writers and intellectuals the hope that they are needed. In Latin America there's the illusion that a writer can change something; of course, it's not that simple.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you have a reader in mind when you write?

PUIG

I could say that each novel has been written for somebody, to convince somebody in particular. It's almost an act of seduction. If not seduction, at least an attempt at explaining something to somebody.

INTERVIEWER

Tell me about your schedule as a writer. Do you write every day?

PUIG

I adore routine. I cannot work away from it. It has to be the same thing every day. It takes a long time for me to wake up, so in the morning I write letters, revise translations—things that don't demand too much. At noon, I go to the beach and swim for twenty minutes. I come back, eat, and take a nap. Without that nap there is no possibility of creation. From four to eight I really work. Then I have dinner and that's it. I cannot work after eating. I stop and see something on the video machine. I hate to interrupt this for weekends. Then it's very hard to go back to work.

INTERVIEWER

You can't pretend that the weekends are weekdays?

PUIG

Friends take me out of my routine.

INTERVIEWER

Which of your novels do you like best?

PUIG

It's difficult to say. There isn't one I dislike more than the others. They all have their problems, but I must admit if I published them it's because I believe that there's something worthwhile in them. That I cannot hide from you.

—Kathleen Wheaton

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Edward Hirsch

Art Pepper

It's the broken phrases, the fury inside him.
Squiggling alto saxophone playing out rickets
And jaundice, a mother who tried to kill him
In her womb with a coathanger, a faltering
God-like father. The past is a bruised cloud
Floating over the houses like a prophecy,
The terrible foghorns off the shore at San Pedro.

Lightning without thunder. Years without playing.
Years of blowing out smoke and inhaling fire,
Junk and cold turkey, smacking up, the habit
Of cooking powder in spoons, the eyedroppers,
The spikes. Tracks on both arms. Tattoos.
The hospital cells at Fort Worth, the wire cages
In the L.A. County, the hole at San Quentin.

And always the blunt instrument of sex, the hurt
Bubbling up inside him like a wound, the small
Deaths. The wind piercing the sheer skin
Of a dark lake at dawn. The streets at 5 a.m.
After a cool rain. The smoky blue clubs.
The chords of Parker, of Young, of Coltrane.
Playing solo means going on alone, improvising,

Hitting the notes, ringing the changes.
It's clipped phrasing and dry-ice in summer,
Straining against the rhythm, speeding it up,
Loping forward and looping back, finding the curl
In the wave, the mood in the air. It's
Splintered tones and furious double timing.
It's leaving the other instruments on stage

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And blowing freedom into the night, into the faces
Of emptiness that peer along the bar, ghosts,
Shallow hulls of nothingness. Hatred of God.
Hatred of white skin that never turns black.
Hatred of Patti, of Dianne, of Christine.
A daughter who grew up without him, a stranger.
Years of being strung out, years without speaking.

Pauses and intervals, silence. A fog rolling
Across the ocean, foghorns in the distance.
A lighthouse rising from the underworld.
A moon swelling in the clouds, an informer,
A twisted white mouth of light. Scars carved
And criss-crossed on his chest. The memory
Of nodding out, the dazed drop-off into sleep.

And then the curious joy of surviving, joy
Of waking up in a dusky room to a gush
Of fresh notes, a tremoring sheet of sound.
Jamming again. Careening through the scales
For the creatures who haunt the night.
Bopping through the streets in a half-light
With Laurie on his arm, a witness, a believer.

The night is going to burst inside him.
The wind is going to break loose forever
From his lungs. It's the fury of improvising,
Of going on alone. It's the fierce clarity
Of each note coming to an end, distinct,
Glistening. The alto's full-bodied laughter.
The white grief-stricken wail of death.

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Bruce Bawer

Sixty-fifth Street Poems

1.

Love, here we stand at the beginning
of our life together, and I find myself
thinking of a hot summer night
in my seventeenth year, when I lay
alone in a strange room, in a dormitory bed
for the first time in my life, too scared
to rise, too thrilled to sleep. The dark
screamed out "The Night Chicago Died,"
and indeed it was as if something had died
and something were being born. In other rooms,
I knew, the boys and girls I'd met that day
were doing things that were a mystery
to me; I felt apart from them—and yet,
that night, a part of all they were.
For though I recognized I'd never really
be one of them, and wasn't yet aware
I wasn't quite the boy my parents knew,
it was as if that night I realized,
somewhere deep within, that I'd discover
myself in much the way a geometry student
swings a compass from one place, then another,
to find a unique point.

2.

It's barely the middle of January,
and already the black leather gloves
you bought me for Christmas are ruined,
stiff and water-lined, their proud shine gone.

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They spent night before last in the gutter,
in melting snow, and it wasn't till morning
that I missed them, and ran outside
to find them soaked. However did it happen?
All day I'd been so careful, keeping them
in my coat pocket, neatly folded,
constantly reaching in and touching them
to make sure they were there. All I
could think of was the price tag I'd glimpsed
by accident: a hundred dollars.
So precious, and so losable! They seemed
almost as much a burden as a gift, but when
I tried to give them back you shook your head.
"I want you to have the best," you said.
I kept them. And since I couldn't bring myself
either to show them off or hide them away
in a bedroom drawer, I carried them
around in my pocket, invisible to the world,
every so often stroking them gingerly
with my fingertips. Until the other night
when, unwittingly, I let them fall,
in silent darkness, into the gray, wet snow.

3.

A quarter after midnight, and the light
from Sloan Kettering, soft and yellow,
touches your face upon the pillow,
here in our darkened room. My right
hand meanders through your hair, straight
and freshly cut; my left hand follows
your breath, in and out. I whisper: "Hello."
"Hello," you breathe. Smooth and white,
your face glows softly, like the moon,
and I stare at you silently, stunned
by the testimony of my eyes.
A year ago, this might have been the moon.
Now it's home. Day by day I wonder
at the glory of these nights and days.

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Paul Lake

The Century Killer

The way I had it figured as a kid,
This Mercury would be a relic now
Mounted in some museum, on display
With biplanes, trains, Apollo space capsules
And other tokens of our earthly past.
I never thought that I'd be plowing wind
In one of these old fossil-burning buckets,
Talking to you about such mundane things
As where I went to school or L.A. weather.
I figured that by my age things would change—
Instead of chugging California smog,
We'd live in free fall somewhere deep in space
Beyond the smothering hug of gravity,
Scouting the rings of Saturn, or mining ore
On asteroids, or terraforming Mars
The way experts predicted in my teens.

That's why I hit the road on nights like this
And drive across the desert by myself—
To see the stars so close I might be steering
From world to world across the galaxy
In search of that more habitable world
I first saw pictured then in *Look* and *Life*.
This world is only one of that world's futures.
On other planes, we're living other lives.
Don't ask me how I know.
Tonight, for instance,
I might have dropped you off outside of town
Or passed you by without a second's notice—
And somewhere in their parallel dimensions
Both things are happening simultaneously
With other variations beyond count.

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Not here, though. Here you stare up at the sky
As I drive toward that distant nebula
Of lights, as if there were no other selves
Converging and diverging at each crossroad.
We've gained solidity, like stone or bone.
I've fleshed us out like the textbook illustrations
I meditated on in junior college,
Projecting myself backward into time
Like the hero in a science fiction novel
Until I reached my goal, the late Stone Age,
And moved among those fur clad men and women
Clutching their polished bone and stone-chipped tools
Until a cough or shuffle fetched me back
To night school and my dull instructor's voice.
I envied them their savage innocence,
Their fearless hearts.

Imagine setting out
Without sails, maps, or compasses to claim
Every continent and two-bit desert island
From here to Bimini and the North Pole,
Trusting the wind to toss your starving party
Onto a sandy void a world away.
And then to settle down and make a life
Complete with language, gods, and table manners
Out of an empty waste . . . .

We couldn't do it.
We've lost ourselves beneath a tottering pile
Of histories and myths and languages—
Greek, Latin, French—the things an English schoolboy
Was forced to learn—then math, computers, science . . . .
It got too much for anyone to stand!
That's what I saw. It only needed courage
To give the thing a push and let it topple.
So much for dreams, so much for science fiction.
Here's where we are forever—shrunken, small,
And lost beneath a scattering of stars
We'll never visit, growing thick and heavy.

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That's why I never tried to finish school.
I saw we'd lost the simple elegance
Of hand axes and deftly whittled bone
And that the best that we could hope for now
Would be a kind of throwback to that time—
A tire iron simple as a thigh bone,
A chromed and thundering chariot of a car,
And in the place of virgin continents
And chartless seas, a four lane interstate
To guide the modern hunter to his prey.
There, if a man could find it in himself
To free his mind and conscience from their shackles,
He could renew himself, again and again,
Washing the soot of time away with blood
And reemerging pure, anonymous,
And stripped of all civilizing inhibitions
That shrink and weigh him down.

I had a teacher
Back at that school who always used to say
That good and evil were only categories
And that if we could step outside their bounds
Just once, we'd see things in another light.
He was an atheist, with two small daughters
Framed on his desk, for all his heady talk,
And stuttered when I told him of my plan—
Though why, if there's no God and good and evil
Are merely mind-projected categories
Any of it should shock.

What is surprising
Is how the open highway swallows hours
And turns them into miles, not keeping count,
Whatever happens, so even I lose track
Of what I tried to drive into his head
A half a life ago, or why it matters
To tell it to you now as we approach
The outer edge of Phoenix, except to say

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A certain peace comes in the telling of it—
I'm not sure why—and afterwards I feel
Weightless, serene . . . as if this Mercury
Were like its namesake, god of roads and thieves,
And I had all the time that ever was
Or ever will be pressed between my palms:

I roll it in a ball and then I squeeze.

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Gabrielle Glancy

The Way the World Appears

The water tower poses a challenge. Against
the shadows of the sky are planes of light.
There seems to be no touching, but actually
opening before him there's a narrowing,
the way the world appears. He thinks he sees a bridge—
cables, a dusty light crossing back and forth
between them. A great geometric pine, silver green,
stretched until its needles are as thin as mist,
millions of tiny dotted lines, connecting
the continents between them. Even the dimmest
contrast of this against that, a page turning,
is as sharp as clouds against the sky. But
how can clouds be sharp against the sky since
the sky falls infinitely backwards and clouds are
only the center of an edgeless thought? Still,
through their slow drifting, he can see, like the hour
hand on a clock, the movement of lips in waking,
what he wants always to get himself through.

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Malcolm Cowley: From the Editor's Desk

edited by Donald W. Faulkner

While Malcolm Cowley's career as a critic, literary historian, and poet is well-known and highly regarded, one element of his long career remains relatively unexplored. He was a prolific correspondent – his letters reflect not only his personality but his discerning judgments about what he termed "the literary situation." A selection of his correspondence with his great friend Kenneth Burke has been published, as well as the bulk of his letters to William Faulkner, but very little else. The dozen letters and the reader's report that follow suggest the quality of his editorial views and the clarity with which he expressed them.

Cowley's most notable works include his collection of poetry, Blue Juniata: A Life, Exile's Return, The Faulkner-Cowley File, A Second Flowering, – –And I Worked At the Writer's Trade, The Dream of the Golden Mountains, *and* The Flower and the Leaf.

After holding the position of literary editor of The New Republic *during the thirties and forties (he succeeded Ed-*

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mund Wilson), he became associated with the Viking Press, where he edited The Portable Hemingway *(1944),* The Portable Faulkner *(1946), and* The Portable Hawthorne *(1948).*

* * *

In 1938 Edmund Wilson wrote Cowley an angry letter accusing him of being a mouthpiece for the Soviets in his articles for The New Republic. *He took Cowley to task not only for his defense of leftist causes, but in particular for his praise of Hemingway's recently published* To Have and Have Not, *which Wilson referred to as Hemingway's "Popeye-The-Sailor-Man" novel.*

RFD Gaylordsville, Conn.
October 31, 1938

Dear Edmund:

I hate letters and would much rather do my explaining or berating face to face—that's why I wrote a couple of months ago that I was anxious to talk things out with you. But once I set out to write a letter, it will have to be a long one. . . .

I agree with you that I ought to get out of politics and back to literature. We ought to all do that—and it's a course I want to urge on you very seriously. I don't lay claim to much political talent. But yours—my God—is a minus quantity, for the simple reason that politics is based on the activities of groups, and you have always congenitally mistrusted and at times completely misunderstood group activities. And when political convictions lead you to accusing me of being bribed or blackmailed by the C[ommunist] P[arty]—well, it's time to stop and think whether the whole business shouldn't be chucked overboard.

Did you read the piece I wrote about *To Have and Have Not* or did you read Margaret Marshall's attack on the piece in *The Nation*? I'm asking because I don't think you'd disagree with most of what I said. The piece began with a general tribute

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to Hemingway, written because I heard that he thought I had always treated him unfairly, and because I wanted to set the record straight. For God's sake, if I had wanted to praise him for helping the revolution, I'd have done it when he wrote *Green Hills of Africa*, because I knew then that he was doing a lot for the revolutionists in both Spain and Cuba. But after this general tribute, I said that *To Have and Have Not* sounded, with all its faults, as if he were about to begin a new career. It's still too early to decide whether I was wrong. He may crack up after all—there are dangerous signs of self-loathing and self-pity in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," written about the same time. And his new play is only fair. . . .

And one other point, this time about your Marx series. I had the feeling that although the biographical chapters will be very effective in your book, they weren't much good in or for the magazine. You seemed to be trying a good stunt—to bring the discussion of Marx down to earth, to write about him without awe or fireworks, as if he was a great literary figure—but the result in the magazine sounded like a combination of Mehring and Ruhle, with the good points of both but without much added to either. The new piece, the long summary chapter on Marx's ideas, is vastly better because it carries you into new ground. But George [Soule] has written you about that. Meanwhile your two long essays in *Partisan Review*—on Flaubert and James—would have been fine for the N[ew] R[epublic], because we are terribly in need of good literary material. I don't think that any arrangement with the paper will be satisfactory unless you can talk or write to us in advance and tell us what you are planning to do.

In the middle of this letter I heard a loud barking outside the window. Rowdy the spaniel had found a cock pheasant in the alfalfa field and pheasant had flown down into swamp. I grabbed the shotgun and went out. Pheasant had disappeared. I walked on into a weed field. There I stopped and began thinking about your letter and suddenly pheasant flew up under my feet and I didn't shoot. So I'll blame you for now making me miss a pheasant. . . . Let's actually forget this political stuff, Stalin hiding under your bed and Trotsky in my hair,

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and talk about books for a change. There are three young poets, no four, who I think are pretty good. One is Winfield Townley Scott, who works on the *Providence Journal*. One is Howard Nutt of Peoria, Illinois; we're printing some of his stuff. One is Nelson Algren of Chicago, author of a proletarian novel; he is now writing a series of free-verse rhapsodic poems on the destruction of Mayor Kelly's Chicago at twenty minutes to two in the morning. One is an ex-objectivist named Kenneth Rexroth, of San Francisco; he does very nice pedestrian poems, like translations from the Chinese, on his girl and his boyhood. Be watching out for all of them. The last three are or were on WPA. Another WPAyer named Sterling Brown, a Negro, is also very good, though I think you've heard about him.

I find it harder and harder to read novels. And I still want a chance to talk things out with you.

As ever,

Malcolm

* * *

In 1944 Cowley edited The Portable Hemingway *for the Viking Press portable series—a volume Hemingway referred to as "The Potable Hemingstein." In the late forties Cowley began work on a long profile commissioned by* Life *magazine. For his research, he and his family visited Hemingway at the Finca Vigia in Cuba—rekindling a friendship they had enjoyed in Paris years earlier. The event recounted in the following letter reflects the growing anti-Communism of the late forties and fifties.*

Sherman, Conn., May 3, 1949.

Dear Ernest:

Note that we have a new address. As the result of a campaign run by our little mimeographed fortnightly newspaper,

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the *Sherman Sentinel*, our little town now has its own post office, and aren't we sorry. The chief result is that the mails are slower and packages sometimes get mislaid for a week. The town snoop is postmistress. I haven't written you for an age, or damned near ten weeks. Just after writing you the last long letter—the one which I sent off the same day as the letter to Mary, and which it appears from your letter that you never received—just then I got involved in a hell of a troublesome situation that kept me busy for a long time. It was about Yaddo, an old robber baron estate in Saratoga Springs endowed as a foundation to give free board and lodging to writers, artists and composers. I'm on the board of directors, worse luck. One of the writers who had spent a long time at Yaddo, more than four years, was Agnes Smedley. She is, and has always been, an enthusiastic supporter of the Chinese Communists. A year ago it began to look as if her political activities would make trouble for Yaddo, and Mrs. Elizabeth Ames, who runs the place, asked Agnes either to moderate those activities or else to leave. She left. On February 10 of this year General MacArthur's headquarters issued a big statement that accused Smedley of being a Russian spy. She isn't, of course, and Smedley forced the Army to apologize. But meanwhile the effbiyai had descended on Yaddo to ask questions of Mrs. Ames and the writer guests.

Does this sound complicated? It's only the beginning of a story that belongs in the history books. The guests, as it happened, were all of the type now described as "passionate anti-Stalinists." They became so disturbed at being questioned by the effbiyai that they got together, added two and two, squared the result, multiplied by pi squared, and reached the conclusion that Mrs. Ames was, in their words, "somehow deeply and mysteriously involved" in subversive activities. A meeting of the directors was called in Saratoga, and it turned out to be one of the grisliest days through which I have ever lived. All sorts of suspicions, dislikes, malice came to the surface. Charges were made, evidence was offered, and in the course of seven or eight hours the evidence slowly dissolved into nothing but unfounded gossip. The meeting was ad-

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journed for a month to allow the directors to make further investigations.

The end was, as you might say, happy for these times. At a second meeting in New York, Mrs. Ames was formally cleared of the charges. But then the guest who had been most active in bringing the charges, Robert Lowell—who is incidentally a very fine poet—suddenly went out of his head, not at the meeting, but a few days later in Chicago, and had to be put into handcuffs by four sweating policemen and carried off for treatment. Paranoid psychosis was the doctors' verdict. What we had really been living through and sitting in grave judgment over was paranoia that had passed from mind to mind like measles running through a school. Not so long afterwards Drew Pearson gave his famous broadcast about Forrestal and how he had been carried off to the loony bin shouting, "The Russians are after me." This great nation had been adopting its policies on the advice of a paranoiac as Secretary of Defense. Maybe this is the age of paranoia, of international delusions of persecution and grandeur. Maybe persons like Forrestal and Robert Lowell are the chosen representatives and suffering Christs of an era. . . .

As ever,

Malcolm

* * *

A fine translator and critic of French literature (with translations of Valéry, Gide, and Aragon, among others), Cowley was assigned to work with Marianne Moore on her translations of La Fontaine's Fables. *The two had been friends since her early days on the editorial staff of* The Dial. *The editing of the* Fables *turned out to be very difficult—with more than a hundred pages of translations, counter-translations, and critiques passed between them. The two finally despaired of the effort and Miss Moore published the collection, aided by Monroe Engel, with Farrar Straus in 1956.*

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[August (?) 1949]

To Pascal Covici, Viking Press:

This Marianne Moore script saddens me. So much talent, toil, application—and so much dullness as the end product. She goes wrong by enormous effort, by the painstaking application of the wrong principles, when by doing half as much work she could go right. The two principles that led her astray are (1) that the rhythm of the English should resemble that of the French—whereas the truth is that rhythm is comparatively unimportant in French poetry, many lines having only two accents, one before the cesura and the other at the end of the line; and (2) that she should use rhymes resembling the *sound* of the French rhymes—so she gets the sound and loses the sense. This is especially apparent at the ends of the fables, where La Fontaine points his morals in an easy aphoristic way.

Compare, for example:

> —Nuit et jour à tout venant
> Je chantais, ne vous déplaise.
> —Vous chantiez? j'en suis fort aise:
> Eh bien! dansez maintentant.
>
> ("Night and day" [said the grasshopper] "I sang, if it please you, for everyone who passed by."—"You sang?" [said the ant]. "I am very glad to hear it. Now dance.")

Compare those simple lines with Miss Moore's version:

> "—Night and day, trilled for perchance
> Errant ears, offending yours.
> —Not care for chirrs? Sweet sound allures.
> Rather than shiver better dance."

What the hell does that mean, and who's saying what? Or again, take the last line of the fable of the wolf and the dog:

> Cela dit, maître loup s'enfuit et court encor.
>
> (At which Master Wolf ran off and is still.)

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But Miss Moore writes:

"Fleeing his undoing and still going—ears a-roar."

"Ears a-roar" is inserted simply to preserve the *or* sound of La Fontaine's rhyme in *encor.* And it spoils the line and doesn't make sense.

I could go on. And go on. I still think we should publish the book. Miss Moore is a very distinguished author and it is fine to have her on the Viking list. The book might sell on her reputation, as an engineless Ford is said to run. An introduction by Miss Moore would help, and so would illustrations. At present I think it might be just as well to let her go ahead with the job without bothering her too much. Anyhow I'd hate to butt in. But it might be a good idea for me to write her and say that with Monroe Engel in Italy I would be glad to answer any questions as they come along; and in the same letter I might argue with her gently about her final lines. If she could just make them sharp and simple and aphoristic, a good many of the fables would be redeemed.

MC

* * *

The first of these letters to Ernest Hemingway was written when Cowley was working on a series of essays that became part of his book, The Literary Situation. *At the time of the second letter, he was editing a definitive edition of F. Scott Fitzgerald's* Tender is the Night.

Sherman, Conn.,
October 7, 1949.

Dear Ernest:

. . . Just now I'm doing a pretty hard critical job. I've got stacked in front of me ten novels by authors who appeared during or since the war—novels that have been favorably

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reviewed by the highbrow critics—and I'm trying to see whether they reveal any new standards in fiction. To some extent they do. Especially they reveal negative tendencies: they aren't naturalistic, aren't experimental, aren't rebellious, aren't social, aren't behavioristic. On the positive side, they are concerned with the moral problems of individuals. About their most striking feature, outside of the conscious efforts at symbolism, is how they are preoccupied with evil—how they personify or objectify evil as an old fairy, a little girl, a professor, a hired man or a mountain lion.

I'm talking about authors like Lionel Trilling, Saul Bellow, Eudora Welty, Truman Capote, Jean Stafford, Robert Lowry. They write good prose, sometimes very good prose. They can tell you the shades of meaning conveyed by a look; you might say that was their specialty. But, God, how most of them flinch away from a big scene. And if they happen to run into a big theme (like Mary McCarthy in *The Oasis*), how they do insist on avoiding its implications and sticking to their fine jewelry work, as if they were carving cameos on the side of Stone Mountain. . . . Thought I would contrast them with Nelson Algren, who, as far as subject goes, might still be writing in 1935, but who has recklessness and a real feeling for the language as it is not spoken at Vassar. Outside of writers like Algren, and there aren't many of them, we're getting back into an era of books by old maids . . . the membrane over their minds has never been broken. . . .

As ever,

Malcolm

Sherman, Conn.,
November 3, 1951

Dear Ernest,

I almost wrote November 3, 1851, and that gives a picture of how a man can live in the past. I had been reading a big collection of documents called *The Melville Log*, in which

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Melville's life is recorded from day to day, so far as the records survive. His daughter Fanny hated him and burned most of the family papers, so that people thought for a long time there weren't any records at all; but the scholars have been working on him for the last twenty years and now they've collected so many documents that merely to quote the pertinent passages from them makes up a two-volume work of nine hundred and thirty-three pages. In November 1851 Melville had finished *Moby Dick*; he had written it in a little more than a year, written it twice, in a high state of elation, but after he finished it he was dead-tired, morose, suicidal. Then, without giving himself a chance for rest he plunged into *Pierre*, worked on it from eight o'clock to dark each day in a cold room in Pittsfield, didn't eat till he staggered out of the room in the dusk. It was a crazy book when he finished it, and was such a complete failure (three hundred and sixty-two copies sold in twenty years) that he was never again able to earn a living as a writer. He had himself a long breakdown, stopped seeing his friends, tried to earn a living as a magazine writer but failed at it, tried to earn a living as a lecturer but failed at it, finally gave up the writing game completely (he was trying to learn to be a poet and some of his poems were very good, but he regarded that as a private matter), got a job in the customs house at five dollars a day and lived in retirement for thirty years. When other writers who admired him—there were a few—looked him up in his retirement, he gave them the brush-off and apparently most of his family came to regard him as a mean old man.

He had no education beyond age twelve—or no education but the very best, the sort to be had by shipping before the mast. He read enormously. He couldn't spell and his grammar was shaky, but his sisters used to copy his manuscripts for him in those days before the typewriter and they peppered the text with commas and changed "don't" to "doesn't." He accepted that for a time. But later when his wife copied his manuscripts he taught her not to use any punctuation whatever and put it all in himself on the final revision.

So we're back at the big question, how much should an edi-

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tor do? I think it all depends whose manuscript he is working on. When a writer knows what he wants to do, then the editor should keep his hands off the manuscript, strictly, and the copyreader and the proofreader should confine themselves to queries and questions of spelling. When a writer is worth publishing like our late friend Li'l Abner*, but doesn't know when to stop, then an editor like Max Perkins can certainly help him (and help the public more, by saving them the trouble of reading whole packing-boxes full of tripe). Scott's a different matter. Generally speaking he knew what he wanted in a big way, and in small ways too, but he was always running into trouble about questions of spelling (especially proper names; he called you "Hemminway" and always misspelled the name of Ginevra King, with whom he had been in love for three years desperately; he called her "Genevra"), punctuation, grammar, geography, chronology (as when a man named McKibben, in *Tender*, "unscrewed two blooded wire-hares from a nearby table and departed." On the next page he's still there, still talking.) He hadn't any theory about those details; he just wanted them to be conventionally right and hadn't the sort of eye that caught them on the page. For some damned reason Max never put the book through Scribner's copy-editing department, where those matters would have been caught and queried; he simply turned it over to Miss What's-her-name, his nice secretary, to handle. Scott himself got a Frenchman to fix up the French quotations (though a couple must have slipped past the Frenchman), but had no help on the Italian. What I did to the book was just what Scribner's proofreading department would have done if the manuscript had passed through their hands. I thought it was the only fair thing to do for Scott, because otherwise people were privileged to think that he was the only illiterate author in the United States. They ought to see some other manuscripts.

People like you who work over every detail of their manuscripts are rare as hell in the country these days. They are the last individual handicraftsmen. Most of our so-called writers

* Hemingway's name for Thomas Wolfe

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just do part of their work, as if they had only one job on the production line, before the manuscript moves on into the varnish room. . . .

As ever,

Malcolm

* * *

Cowley is writing to Hemingway about John Dos Passos. They often corresponded about politics – in particular about other writers and their changing political views.

Sherman, Conn.,
January 28, 1952

Dear Ernest,

. . . What's Dos been converted to? Pelmanism? I haven't read his last novel about the Chosen Country, but the reviews made it sound as exciting as cornmeal mush. Still, it seemed to have a lot about his family and early life in it, so that I'll have to pour milk on it and lick the bowl, sooner or later, but not in this dismal weather. Right now I couldn't stand his bracing sentiments. Dos did something truly remarkable in his early novels, especially *Manhattan Transfer* and *USA*. Here for a hundred years the world has been getting more and more crowded and collective, so that the real heroes of an action story are likely to be not a man (where are men these days?) but a squad, a platoon, a company, an army or a city or a nation. Dos discovered and evolved a technique for treating these collective heroes in a unified novel. That was something for the age, and hundreds of younger writers have been adapting his technique to their own subjects. Most of the World War II novelists did so (Mailer, Burns, for example), besides Sartre and many other Frenchmen – in fact the French still think that Dos is one of the world classics. After a man has done that sort of job it's a pity to see him conked or sapped or sandburged

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into conformity and hurrah for the American way of canned life. I love my country when it's in trouble but not when it's a chosen country throwing its platitudes around . . . .

Snow still falling. Looked out at my pheasant-feeding station, but there are no birds there. Two months ago there were eleven, but the foxes got at least three of them and I guess the others were frightened away—or maybe they heard that they'd been listed in *Red Channels*.*

Our best to you and Mary in this year of our Luce.

As ever,

Malcolm

* * *

Here Cowley is writing to Hemingway in anticipation of the publication of The Old Man and the Sea. *He was aware that the book was part of a larger work, some of which became the posthumously-published* Islands in the Stream.

Sherman, Conn.,
May 24, 1952

Dear Ernest:

It's very good news that you're bringing out a book in September, even if the book is only a section of the big job you've been working on. I hear something about it from Carlos Baker and Sammy Boal and they both said it was wonderful, and apparently the same report has been made by others and is spreading around; it's a good thing to have spread. From this distance I don't get the logic of publishing only one-quarter of the sea book, which in turn is only one-third (isn't it?) of the big job—but you have experience and wisdom in these publishing matters, and patience and independence, and bringing out the books as they are ready will probably prove

* A right-wing publication which listed suspected subversives.

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to be the best course. Let the kids who are starting and have to impress readers with mere bulk, let them do the behemoths. (Of which the chief advantage is that 1. the daily reviewers haven't time to finish them, and 2. are too polite to say mean things about what they haven't read, and therefore 3. say nice things about them in spite of being bored from here to eternity.) A short, wonderful book will be a wonderful relief.

. . . I didn't know Charlie Scribner very well, but he had character and I liked what I knew of him. His death coming not so long after Max Perkins' was tough for the house and for the literary world. I hear that young Charlie was taking hold of things in a good fashion. In general the publishing trade is in a pretty chaotic condition—readers are showing more hesitation about paying $3 or $4 for novels when they can wait and buy them for 25 or 35 cents. Brentano's took the books out of its gallery and is replacing them with a line of sea shells—I'm not making a joke, that's what they're doing. Maybe we should try inscribing little poems on sea shells. The great purge* hasn't really hit the publishing trade (except at Little, Brown), but there are signs that the purgers are working in this direction and the publishers are scared enough so that they don't bring out some books that would probably have a large sale. Hollywood has just made the big surrender to the American Legion, which henceforth will decide who is to be hired and fired. The motto everywhere is Play It Safe, and that explains why publishers' lists are so full of the trivial and inconsequential. Last year the movies tried to break over, since they were suffering from malnutrition in the box office; they produced several good films (*Streetcar, Place in the Sun, Death of a Salesman, Born Yesterday, The Marrying Kind*) and most of the good films were picketed by the American Legion and the Catholic War Veterans, so that the error is unlikely to be repeated.

The Fitzgerald boom is over. The Faulkner boom is still running strong, and it's encouraged by the fact that Faulkner is

* The McCarthyite loyalty crusade.

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getting holy. These days nothing succeeds like a strong dose of piety. I don't blame Faulkner at all, since he doesn't give a damn for the public, but the Faulkner critics are becoming gloriously silly. The young novelists are just crazy about symbols, symbol, symbol, who's got the symbol. They think that a good symbol takes the place of a story—lucky for them if it does, because most of them can't tell stories. Their characters are so damned symbolic you don't know what they mean. The two mottoes of the young novelists are, "Mother was to blame" and "Evil is in the human heart." . . .

Love to Mary in this time of personal and public trouble.

As ever,

Malcolm

* * *

John Cheever's work came to Cowley's attention during his New Republic *days. Cowley suggested Cheever write "four stories in four days" and directed him to* The New Yorker *where Katharine White accepted two of them. At the time of this letter Cheever was about to publish* The Enormous Radio, *a collection of his short stories. He had written Cowley for a blurb.*

Sherman, Conn.,
January 22, 1953

Dear John,

I enclose a little statement that you can send to your publishers and they can use it if they think it's worth using. I tried to express what I think has been the central virtue of your stories, or at any rate of your best stories—that of giving moments in which the Victim Tells All, or in which the narrator has a sudden feeling of heightened life (as at the end of "Goodbye, My Brother"). The best of all the moments—Joyce called them "epiphanies"—is the end of "Torch Song," which reminds me always of the end of "The Raven":

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"Take thy beak from out my heart and thy form from off my door."

Criticisms: for what they are worth. "Goodbye, My Brother" is finally ambiguous. The boys, meaning the critics, talk about the virtues of irony, and it is ironical that the narrator is as bad as Lawrence in his different way, but it is also troublingly uncertain, so that one wished you had made your own point of view clearer. On the other hand, the emotional quality of the story is wonderful and the characters are solid. It is a story that you could expand into a novel, and my theory is that you'll have to write a novel that way, by starting with one short story and expanding it backward (into the past of the characters) instead of by looking for a "novel" plot, whatever that may be. When you start by looking for a novelistic plot, you'll always break it into complete and separate episodes, out of habit.

Every once in a while you try to buy your epiphanies too cheaply, without paying for them in advance. Two examples: the husband's accusations in "The Enormous Radio," which are unforeshadowed by anything he has said or the wife has thought earlier in the story, and the mother's Ophelia-nutty passage in "The Sutton Place Story," also unforeshadowed by anything in her character as already presented. In "The Pot of Gold" the epiphany approaches on somewhat too noisy feet. But these are all very fine stories.

What next? Go abroad, for Christ's sake. Go abroad and write a novel or a play about these people. If you keep on writing short stories about them you'll reveal your irritation more and more. . . .

As ever,

Malcolm

* * *

Cowley frequently corresponded with writers who asked him for advice. Here he writes to a young novelist, Harriet Arnow, about the trials of contemporary publishing.

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Sherman, Conn.,
October 12, 1954.

Dear Mrs. Arnow:

I won't try to justify your publishers, because what they did with your manuscript was indefensible, but maybe (not perhaps) I can explain the situation that led them to attack your novel with pencils and pickaxes. Actually it's explained in the last part of your letter, when you talk about the sort of education your children are getting. They aren't learning to read for pleasure or to take a joy in language. They're learning to read for facts and read fast, because they're bright children, but most of their schoolmates aren't even learning that.

Little reading for pleasure, hence little good writing. You'd be surprised to learn how badly a lot of professional American writers write. They know how to select a subject that is in the public eye. They know how to present sympathetic characters in taut situations, but they don't know how to write. If their books are grammatical and correctly punctuated and spelled, that's because a copy editor has worked on them.

The publishers who take their work seriously (like Macmillan) have style books and copy editors who know them by heart. They have editors (as distinguished from copy editors) with a thwarted creative instinct that makes them suggest changes and more changes to authors, so as to strengthen their own egos and give them a feeling of creative achievement. You seem to have run into one of those people. When dealing with journalists and scholars and fiction wrights—I was thinking of those good souls who go at fiction like millwrights—these editors and copy editors actually do a lot of good. American popular literature would seem less professional and entertaining without their help. The trouble is that they don't always realize when they are dealing with writers proper, who know how their characters must act and know where every word should fall in a sentence. And the trouble is also that there aren't enough writers proper in America today, so that you can't always blame the editors for failing to recognize them and for treating them as they do the fiction wrights. That's

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partly the fault of our secondary education, though I don't want to blame the schools for everything. Still the fact remains that average Englishmen write better prose than average Americans.

I'd better turn this off, because I'm beginning to sound like Cassandra . . . .

Cordially,

Malcolm Cowley

* * *

In the process of writing a dissertation on Van Wyck Brooks and Malcolm Cowley, among others, John G. Cawelti asked Cowley about his ideas on criticism.

Sherman, Conn.,
February 20, 1955

Dear Mr. Cawelti:

Thoughts on your project.

. . . I've often wondered what sort of critic I was. Primarily I have been a contemporary historian of letters rather than a critic. When, as often, I wrote essays that were primarily critical, they were likely to be biographical criticism—in this sense, that I feel strongly that an author changes, that Hawthorne in 1837, for example, was not the same author as Hawthorne in 1860—and that most generalities about an author, when made on the basis of his life work, without allowing for the changes in the work, are meaningless. I am impressed by the effect on authors, not of broad social changes, but of social changes, sometimes much narrower, that directly affect his life—for example, Whitman was apparently not affected greatly by the panic of 1855, but he was greatly affected by losing his job on the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1848. Writing about an author, I try to understand his life, and I also try hard to understand the actual nature of his achievement (at which point I

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do a good deal of *explication de texte*, but without carrying the procedure to the extremes of the New Critics.) Great is language, but it is great because it is the medium, and almost the basis, of human society—so that I try never to lose sight of the connection between books and life. I feel that a critic who doesn't prove by his own style that he understands the art of using language is incompetent to discuss language as an art.—And what does all this make me? An eclectic?

Sincerely,

Malcolm Cowley

* * *

Cowley had written his friend, the critic Kenneth Burke, about Jack Kerouac and his Beat Generation associates: "Kerouac is a natural writer like a natural spitball pitcher but (has) no sense and no control. Burroughs has every manifestation of genius except the genius." With the help of Pat Covici, his fellow editor at Viking Press, Cowley championed the publication of Kerouac's On the Road.

Sherman, Conn.,
September 16, 1955

Dear Jack,

On the Road—I think that's the right title for the book, not *The Beat Generation*—is now being very seriously considered, or reconsidered, by Viking, and there is quite a good chance that we will publish it, depending on three *ifs*: *if* we can figure out what the right changes will be (cut and rearrangements); *if* we can be sure that the book won't be suppressed for immorality; and *if* it won't get us into libel suits. The libel question is important, because I take it that you're dealing with actual persons. Most of them won't mind what you said about them—Dean Moriarty, for example—and Bill Burroughs for another example—but you run a risk when writing about any-

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one with a position of respectability to maintain, like the character you call Denver D. Doll; I wish you'd tell me more about him, so that I'd know whether the portrait had to be changed. . . .

Are you sure that you haven't used any actual names?

I've promised to do a short introduction if the book is published.

. . . It's good news that you're writing again, and writing a lot on big projects. Also I think that the proper system for you is to write all in a breath, pouring out what you feel. But there are those two sides of writing, the unconscious and the conscious, the creation and the self-criticism, the expression and the communication, the speed and the control. What your system ought to be is to get the whole thing written down fast, in a burst of creative effort, then later go back, put yourself in the reader's place, ask whether and how the first expression ought to be changed to make it more effective. If you'd do that job of revision too, then most of your things would be published, instead of kicking around publishers' offices for years. And being published is what you need right now.

Give my regards to Allen Ginsberg and tell him I'm hoping to write to him next week. And I'll write you again about *On the Road* when I've had time to go through the manuscript carefully, carefully.

As ever,

Malcolm Cowley

* * *

In 1960 Cowley took a teaching position at Stanford University. In his fall term class were a number of students who went on to make a name for themselves—Larry McMurtry, Peter Beagle, C.J. Koch, James Baker Hall, Arvin Brown, Tillie Olsen and Ernest J. Gaines. Also among them was Ken Kesey. Cowley wrote of him to his compatriot Pascal Covici at Viking: "He hasn't ever learned how to spell and didn't even begin

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reading for pleasure until he was an upperclassman . . . He went to school in Oregon on a football scholarship . . . Last year Kesey nearly made the Olympic wrestling team—he has a 19-inch neck, like wrestlers. He's married, 1½ children, works in a state loony bin in this vicinity . . . (his) manuscript might just run out to be something that would have *to be published."*

[Winter '61?]

[submitted to Pascal Covici at Viking Press, a reader's report.]

ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST

by Ken Kesey

Here's the loony-bin novel I've been talking about. I think that for all its obvious faults, the book and the author are worth working with, and publishing.

It's hard to get into. The story is told by a schizophrenic—I'd say that the diagnosis was catatonic dementia—who is also half-Indian, the son of the chief of a dispossessed salmon-fishing tribe. His delusion is that the world is ruled by a Combine that takes the minds and hearts out of everybody and replaces them with electronic elements responsive to master suggestions. To escape the Combine he pretends to be deaf and dumb, and hence is allowed to hear everything that goes on in a big government sanitarium, evidently a veterans' hospital. His ward is ruled by a tyrannical nurse, Miss Rached, who wants to reduce everything to rules and system.

Into the ward comes Randle McMurphy, a big redhead who has simply feigned insanity to escape a term in the county workhouse. The book tells how McMurphy defies Miss Rached, how his rebellion puts new spirit into the patients, how the narrator gradually becomes sane by facing up to his difficulties, and how Miss Rached destroys McMurphy by shock treatments and finally a lobotomy. But the narrator by then is sane

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enough to escape (and in fact we see that there has been an element of sanity even in his delusion, if the delusion is taken metaphorically). There are two enormous scenes in the last part of the novel: eleven loonies, a doctor, and a whore on a sea-going salmon boat—that's one scene—and a big drunken party in the ward at night, with two whores this time and cocktails made with cough medicine that is eighty percent alcohol and ten percent codeine.

The faults of the novel, as I said, are obvious. The author can't spell. Sometimes the narrator, Chief Bromden, talks out of character, when the author wants to preach. The end of the story is false when Bromden kills the wreck of McMurphy and then escapes. If we are to believe that Bromden is really sane enough now to live outside the asylum, he shouldn't commit a murder. Some of Bromden's delusions are overdone: gratuitous dirt and horror. The manuscript would be improved by cutting. But it has enormous vitality and I think the youngsters are going to read and enjoy it.

This is the second novel by Ken Kesey that I've read. For the first he received a Saxton Fellowship on the basis of the early chapters, but Harper turned down the finished manuscript—and was right to turn it down; the book was full of powerful scenes, but became sentimental and lost its story line. In this second book the story line is never lost. Kesey—for biographical details—is an Oregon roughneck who went to the University of Oregon on a football fellowship. While there he took a course in radio script-writing, for a gut. The instructor was so impressed by the imaginative power of his writing (though he couldn't spell) that he told Kesey to apply for a Stanford Creative Writing Fellowship, which he was awarded. That was three years ago. Since leaving Stanford Kesey has supported himself by working as an attendant in a loony bin. He's tough, sentimental, and inventive-experimental in matters of conduct—I could tell you about his diabolical punches made with dry ice, alcohol, and lime juice, so that the mixture boils and fumes as the ice melts, or about his experiments with hallucinogenic mushrooms. He'll probably end by corrupting the whole Stanford group of writers, among whom he's a leader.

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I'm sure, though, that he's going to be heard from and that he'll write many books.

Mac

* * *

While teaching at Stanford University, Cowley received a manuscript of a new collection of short stories by John Cheever.

490 Oregon Avenue,
Palo Alto, Calif.,
February 10, 1961

Dear John,

I just this minute finished reading *Some People, etc.*, with a feeling that it is as good writing as I've run into for a long time. After "Justina," with that wonderful scene of the interview with the mayor about burying the poor woman from a residential zone where death is forbidden, the story I like best and that sticks in my mind (I first read it on a plane coming back from Salt Lake City) is "The Scarlet Moving Van," with Peaches and Gee Gee and the hill towns where sorrow is forbidden like death in Justina's neighborhood. In the other story where the man bakes cakes secretly, the wife dreams of the H-bomb falling in the suburbs, John, I fear that *you're* the H-bomb of suburban neighborhoods. . . .

But look, is it too late to make changes, is the book all bound & everything? There are two changes I would strongly urge and plead for. In "Boy in Rome" that inserted paragraph about the story's being written in Sing Sing spoiled the story for me, not only by sweeping up the dolls, but also by introducing new questions about how the putative author got into Sing Sing, how the bean-hoer learned how to write, how he learned about Rome, etc. For God's sake, couldn't you hide your impatience with your own creation by dropping that paragraph?

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The other suggestion is for something added. I thought your *New Yorker* version of the last story, or chapter ["Some People, Places, and Things that Will Not Appear in My Next Novel"], was wonderful. Now you've weakened it by dropping Section 2, which gives the raison d'être of the book, besides Section 7, which I read to a writing class and had them in stitches. I know the dropped sections were, in the sight of Eternity, the weaker ones—but if they were *all* in the section, *when* they were all in, it had a weight that it lost by your dropping them—the first impression it gave was that of a lively intellect zooming over contemporary fiction and catching its clichés in many cases before anyone had recognized them as clichés. It was *useful* in other words, and should have been preserved as a whole or even expanded instead of being selected and anthologized. Think fast about that, if there's still time for a change.

. . . What is becoming evident in your work is a sort of apocalyptic poetry, as if you were carrying well observed suburban life into some new dimension where everything is a little cockeyed and on the point of being exploded into a mushroom cloud . . .

As ever,

Malcolm

* * *

While working on a master's thesis on Cowley at the University of Pittsburgh in 1960, Betty Cox queried Cowley about various issues during his career. Here he responds to her questions about his political activities in the thirties.

Sherman, Conn.,
September 16, 1960

Dear Mrs. Cox,

That's a very long story you're asking for. No, I'm not any longer sore or sensitive about it, and in fact I've been planning

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to set it all down, perhaps in a book that would continue *Exile's Return*. There's no time to write about it this week, when we're packing for a trip to Stanford while a stream of visitors pours in to say goodbye. But I'll set down some hasty notes.

I was pretty Red in the early 1930s, up to the time when I wrote the first version of *Exile's Return*. It was the time, now forgotten, when the economic structure was going to pieces, and when nobody seemed to have the answer except Marx. The turning point for me was the expedition to Pineville, Kentucky, with Waldo Frank, Edmund Wilson, Mary Heaton Vorse, and Quincy Howe, in the early months of 1932. Then I was one of fifty-two writers who signed the pamphlet called *Culture and the Crisis*, calling for Communist votes in the election of that year. Later I helped to organize the League of American Writers, with its congresses in—wasn't it?—1935, 1937, and 1939. There was another congress in 1941, but by that time I had resigned from the League, of which I had been a vice president from the beginning. (There were books published about each of the congresses. The one I remember is *Fighting Words*, edited by Donald Ogden Stewart. I think they all included speeches of mine.)

I began to have a lot of doubts about the Communists, especially after attending the World Congress of Revolutionary Writers in Madrid in the summer of 1937 (you must have read my account of it). But the world situation, in which Russia was following a better policy than any of the Western nations, kept me from making any public complaints until after the Russo-German pact in the summer of 1939. Then I tried to get the League of American Writers, which was about ninety-seven percent non-Communist in membership, to cut loose from the Communists. The efforts were unsuccessful, and I resigned from the League in the spring of 1940, finally publishing my letter of resignation in *The New Republic*.

At that time the great debate in this country was between the isolationists and the interventionists. The debate raged on the staff of *The New Republic*. I was the interventionist, and junior editor. Bruce Bliven and George Soule, the senior editors, were both of them isolationist, and the paper followed

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an isolationist policy, even though it was owned and financed by Dorothy and Leonard Elmhurst, who were British subjects. In the fall of 1940 I took a leave of absence. While I was gone Leonard Elmhurst came to New York and decreed that the paper should be reorganized and should become interventionist. Bliven became editor in chief (and changed all his beliefs); George Soule and I were removed from management and became, in effect, merely contributing editors. I thought the position was very uncomfortable.

All that year I had been corresponding with Archie MacLeish about policies for this country. We were pretty well agreed on them. When Archie was asked to organize an information service for this country—the Office of Facts and Figures—he invited me to join his staff, and I went to Washington, in December, for a salary of $8000, considered large at the time. Then the storm broke in Congress. I saw a lot of people, collected a lot of good advice, and finally, in February, decided to resign, though I stayed on for a month to finish some work I had undertaken. (I wrote one speech for the Boss, of about 250 words, his Christmas message in 1941. I also wrote part of another speech defending the surviving New Deal agencies, but he didn't use what I wrote, and I knew the New Deal was ended.)

It was a grisly experience in Washington, always feeling that I was being watched, talking with security officers, giving depositions to the FBI; and it left me with the feeling that the less I had to do with government agencies in the future the happier I would be. I got out of politics, but strictly out (except for a little participation in local affairs). I'd been attacked and reviled by the Communists, attacked and reviled by Congressman Dies, and it was a great relief to get back to the garden in Sherman, where everything was peaceful in wartime. I didn't suffer much during the McCarthy era—there was one brush with the American Legion when I was Walker Ames lecturer at the University of Washington in 1950, but the Legion decided that I wasn't a threat to the nation and called off the dogs. I testified at the two trials of Alger Hiss—I hadn't ever met Hiss, but I had known Whittaker Chambers, and he had

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told me some stories that were diametrically opposed to his later testimony. That did make some trouble for me, but amazingly little, considering what some other people suffered. I was sort of proud about never beating my breast in public or rushing to accuse other people of deadly sins, but also my self-imposed silence gave me an uncomfortable feeling of political impotence. I do have some pretty strong political convictions, as you would guess. I think the one great and overriding question is whether the human race will survive on this planet or whether it is going to commit suicide. Atomic suicide is quite possible, and of course I'm for peace—but even if we avoid an atomic war there is the great possibility that the human race will exhaust all the natural resources of the planet, minerals first, then soil, air, pure water, and that the teeming billions will have to live like Indian peasants. I suppose I want a world like Cambria County when I was a boy—thinly settled, full of big woods and trout in little streams. I'm not a radical now or a conservative, but a conservationist, a radical conservationist. . . .

Cordially yours,

Malcolm Cowley

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And languages don't exist.
That's one theory. Here's another:
Something weighs on our shoulders
And settles itself like black light
invisibly in our hair . . .

Pool table. Zebra rug.
Three chairs in a half-circle.
Poster of each palazzo
along the Grand Canal. Photo of Ca Paruta.
San Zeno and Ca Rezzonico, both photographs
Taken by Ponti back in the 19th century.
I see him under his black hood.
Magnesium flash.
Silence. I hear what he has to say.

June 3rd, heat like Scotch tape on the skin,
Mountains the color of nothing,
then something behind mist.
In Tuscany, on the Sette Ponti, Gròpina dead ends
Above the plain and the Arno's marauding cities,
Columns eaten by darkness,
Cathedral unsentenced and plugged in
To what's-not-there,
windows of alabaster, windows of flame.

A manuscript page from "Reading Rorty and Paul Celan One Morning in Early June," an unpublished poem by Charles Wright.

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The Art of Poetry XLI
Charles Wright

From his dust-jacket photographs, you might expect Charles Wright to be a dour man. In person, though, he gives a quite different impression—trim, elegant even in blue jeans, generous, with a Southerner's soft-spoken courtliness. Born in Pickwick Dam, Tennessee, in 1935, he grew up in the South and went to college there. And a few years ago, after a long spell of teaching at the University of California at Irvine, he returned to the South, as poet-in-residence at the University of Virginia.

Wright's work stands out among his generation of poets for

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the austere luxuriance of its textures, its mingling of domestic subjects and foreign methods, and its bold and unpretentious ambition. During the past two decades he has written eight books of poems: The Grave of the Right Hand *(1970),* Hard Freight *(1973),* Bloodlines *(1975),* China Trace *(1977),* The Southern Cross *(1981),* Country Music: Selected Early Poems *(1983; winner of that year's American Book Award in Poetry),* The Other Side of the River *(1984), and* Zone Journals *(1988). He has also translated two volumes of poetry, by Eugenio Montale and Dino Campana, and when I visited him he was putting together a collection of prose writings.*

I had been invited to dinner with the Wrights—Charles, his wife, the photographer Holly Wright, and their son Luke, who had just been accepted at Sewanee and could tell us anything we wanted to know about computers. They live in a handsome Victorian house in Charlottesville. Their dining room has been converted from a parlor, and is large enough for a fireplace and grand piano. We sat at an 18th-century Sheraton walnut table. But the formality was offset by odd details—a witch ball, the bit from the horse of the infamous bandit Joaquin Murieta. Opposite my chair was an imposing oil portrait of Wright's great-grandfather, Charles Penzel, for whom the poet was named. Penzel, from minor Bohemian nobility, had emigrated to America at sixteen. No sooner had he settled down than the Civil War erupted. At twenty-three he took a bullet in the mouth as he yelled "Charge!" during the Battle of Chickamauga. After that tumultuous start, Penzel eventually became a banker in Little Rock, Arkansas, and even wrote poems. One, addressed to a war widow and printed up in a newspaper of the time, begins: "Beyond the flight of Time,/ Beyond the reign of Death,/ There surely is some better clime,/ Where life is not a breath . . . "

After dinner we went up to Wright's huge attic study. It's kept obsessively neat—a trait, he says, he gets from his father, a civil engineer whose desk was scrupulously organized. Here is a poet for whom—as one looks around the room—arrangements matter. On one wall of shelves his books are arranged by their size, not by author or subject. In fact, there are fewer

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books than one might imagine, but more images: stacks of postcards, a zebra rug, gadgets, bird skulls, an heirloom sword—totems all. We pull up chairs next to what he calls his shelf of sacred texts, his lifelong masters, the voices that enabled him to find his own. There beside us are Dante, Pound, the Bible, Plath, Hemingway, Babel, Stevens, Williams, Crane, Roethke, Whitman, Dickinson, Rimbaud, Hopkins, Montale, an anthology of Chinese verse.

Across the room from us, in a narrow dormer alcove, is his desk with its Hermes portable typewriter. Above it are photographs of his wife and of Verona, taken during his first visit there in 1959. Beside these, a drawing of Campana, and a page from an old edition of Inferno, *Canto XXIV. "What I look at has everything to do with what I think," he quickly explains.*

Near the desk, at the end of a daybed, is what looks like an old tin footlocker. Stencilled on the front of it is the name H. W. Wilkinson. It rings a bell.

INTERVIEWER

May I ask what you keep in the box?

CHARLES WRIGHT

Of course. Family things, mostly. Old letters, land grant deeds in Arkansas, a couple of family trees. That sort of stuff. Actually, the land grant deeds are interesting, one signed by James K. Polk, one by John Quincy Adams, and one by Andrew Jackson. Simpler presidencies in those days, when you could spend time signing grants for the territory. The whole lot was in a bottom drawer of my father's desk when he died and I've just rather unceremoniously stuck it in this tin box I bought in an antique shop in California. Family letters in almost indecipherable hands from the mid-1800s in Arkansas, a couple of documents from a great-aunt of mine tracing the family lines on my father's side, from Maryland through Virginia to Tennessee and finally to Arkansas. A lock of Robert E. Lee's hair, if you can believe that! There are bunches of snapshots from my childhood as well. And my old arrowhead collection I had as a boy. And a skeleton or two—all the poems I wrote

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in Italy when I was in the Army, which I have vowed to throw away every year since 1961, but haven't succeeded in doing yet. And a diary of sorts I kept the first year I was in the Army, in California and Italy, before I began trying to write those poems. Wretched stuff. Execrable stuff. I can't bring myself to read it or throw it away. I'm going to do both soon. I guess I keep thinking there might be something I can use one day. But after all these years of ransacking that box for material, I should know better. A kind of poetic *memento mori*, I suppose.

INTERVIEWER

And one of your great-grandfathers was a senator from Arkansas, wasn't he?

WRIGHT

Oh, farther back than that. In the late 1830s—I don't know how many "greats" that makes him. 1837 is the date of the picture we have of the Senate chamber down in the dining room. He's in it, along with Ambrose Sevier, the other senator from Arkansas, and a distant relative. It's an interesting engraving—Longfellow is up in the balcony, as well as Aubudon and the original Cassius Clay. His name was William Savin Fulton. I got the picture because no one else in the family wanted it. I suppose it is rather ugly, but I'm fond of it. He was the family's "illustrious ancestor." Most families have one back down the line, I guess. He's still known as Governor Fulton in the family, for some reason. I just used his recipe for egg nog at Christmas, it's a real killer. I don't know that much about him, really. I suppose there might be more in the box, in some of the letters, but the handwriting is difficult to read, and I'm not sure what else I *need* to know. Nothing, probably. He just shines back there, our distant star, whose name we all know, but not much else.

INTERVIEWER

Now I remember. You dedicated *The Southern Cross* to the

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same mysterious H. W. Wilkinson whose name is stencilled on that tin locker. It's meant, then—that dedication—as a gesture to your past? This trunk is really a sort of voice-box, a memory and a throat for the past. The poems in *The Southern Cross* have that character too.

WRIGHT

Mr. Wilkinson is as mysterious to me as he is to you. His name was on the box when I bought it, and that's all I know about him. *The Southern Cross* was dedicated to the box, actually, as you surmise, and not to Mr. Wilkinson per se: he's just a stand-in for a catch-all, if such a thing is possible. A voice-box is a nice way to put it, although it's been more so in the past than it is now. Especially around the time of *Bloodlines* and, as you say, *The Southern Cross*. I used some of its material also in "Arkansas Traveller," from *The Other Side of the River*. My great-grandfather's obituary from the Little Rock paper in 1906, some fragments from the letters about the move from Tennessee to Arkansas in the early 1800s. Stuff like that. I guess I thought it was cute, as well, to dedicate a book ostensibly to someone I didn't know. But, as you say, the real gesture was to my past, a way of letting those speak whose voices are too faint to hear. So it's a voice-box in that sense, too; it amplifies the deep and desperate whispers of those who have disappeared into a kind of request for recognition. Sort of like La Pia in Canto V of the *Purgatorio*, though in no way so poignant or affecting: "*Deh, quando tu sarai tornato al mondo/ e riposato de la lunga via/ . . . recorditi di me, che son La Pia . . .*" "Remember me, remember me . . ." Well, I hope that some of the poems in which I use their leftovers do remember them. And the first poem in *The Southern Cross*, "Homage to Paul Cézanne," takes up that charge somewhat—though the dead are not named, I did have my own family, from the box, in mind. "A throat for the past." That's a nice way of putting it.

INTERVIEWER

You've mentioned your early poems. Is it nostalgia that

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makes you keep them? What are they like? Or better, what did they know and *not* know how to do?

WRIGHT

They didn't know how to do *anything*. Mostly, I guess, because they didn't know what they were *supposed* to do. And I myself had no clue. I had read *The Pisan Cantos* and *The Selected Poems of Ezra Pound*. So I started at the end instead of the beginning, trying to write about what I was seeing—Italy—in terms of what I had been reading—*Pisan Cantos*. Wrong from the start—an Attic disgrace. If one has to write poorly before one can write well—which I think is true—and if that can be extended to read that One has to write deplorably before one can write extraordinarily well, then I definitely started in the right place for the latter. I suppose it's nostalgia that makes me keep them. That and the sense of duty that one shouldn't destroy one's stunted darlings. Keep them out of sight, yes, but don't abuse them. Rather like the retarded great-aunt in the attic, that mainstay of Southern gothic. Soon, I know, I must harden my heart and dispose of them. Euthanasia, so to speak. But for the moment, to continue your figure from the last question, they lie there like a bone in the dark throat of my past. It's not their fault. They just never had a chance.

INTERVIEWER

Even with those early poems, it seems a bit of a late start. You were already in the army, weren't you? Why then—or rather, why not before then?

WRIGHT

Why I didn't before then is unanswerable, probably. Who knows why we don't do things? I would imagine it was because poetry was never presented to me in a way that generated any excitement. I certainly remember nothing of it either in boarding school or in college. In college, in fact, there was one creative writing course taught every other year by the Shakespeare professor—not exactly a commitment on the

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school's part. And all the straight English courses I took seemed to revolve around prose, not poetry. An ongoing debility, I might add, almost everywhere. It didn't help, I suppose, that I was a history major as well. I did try to write stories in college, or what I thought were stories—mood pieces, really, purple prose on the model of Thomas Wolfe. I had no idea *how* to do anything, and no one told me or showed me. If I had been a photograph, I would have been under-exposed and under-developed. As it was, I was merely under-educated. But then, my college never claimed it was in the business of turning out writers—William Styron, for instance, left after his freshman year. It turned out lawyers, doctors and Presbyterian ministers. At least back in those days it did. It wasn't until I stumbled onto *The Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* that I discovered a form that seemed suited to my mental and emotional inclinations—the lyric poem, a form, or sub-genre, I guess, that didn't depend on a narrative structure, but on an imagistic one, an associational one. "Gists and piths," as they say, instead of intricacy of narrative line.

INTERVIEWER

Okay, but why then? What took?

WRIGHT

That's a bit easier. Mostly it's because I read a poem that just overwhelmed me, blew me away, as the saying goes. It was "Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula" by Pound, from the *Selected Poems*. I loved the sound of it—it was in iambic pentameter, although I didn't know it at the time, and even if I had, I wouldn't have know what that was. That it was describing the very location I was reading it in—Sirmione peninsula, in the ruins of the villa of the Roman poet, Catullus—didn't hurt either. In any case, it was enough of a thunderclap to move me swiftly through the *Selected Poems*, and farther down the road as well. I bought a Guanda paperback edition of *The Pisan Cantos*, recently translated into Italian with the original English on the facing page, and read that. Understanding almost nothing, I might add, except some place names. Pound had,

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a year before—this was in 1959—returned to Italy and was living above Merano, in Brunnenberg, so his books were available at the local bookstores. At least they were available in Verona, where I lived. Later I got a Faber & Faber *Cantos*, and bought *Rock Drill* and *Thrones*, too. But it was *The Pisan Cantos* that struck me, along with *Cathay* in the *Selected Poems*. It was the first poetry I ever bought. I was twenty-three. Anyway, that's why then, finally, I began to try to write poems.

INTERVIEWER

You say you began writing in Italy. You could as easily say you began writing in the army—but you don't.

WRIGHT

Well, being in the army is physical, being in Italy is metaphysical. Or so it seemed at the time. So you could say, and I often do, that I began writing poems in the army in Italy. The metaphysics of the quotidian. The army, actually, was very good to me, much better to me than I was to it. I gave them four years of my time and they gave me back, it turned out, a life. The army was only the base, as Stevens says, but it *was* the base. And from it I drifted into the Italian landscape and was never the same again. I never *looked* at anything the same way again. I never *listened* to anything in the same way. My eight-to-five in the army was the old way, the rest of the time was the new way. And since I never wrote poems, or what I thought of as poems, during army hours, I suppose I tend to think of my writing as being in Italy, off-duty, as opposed to the army workaday world. The army was still the United States—off-duty was a foreign country. The army was fact, Italy was fiction. Again, the metaphysics of the quotidian. Or, poetry is the fiction we use to prove the fact. Something like that.

INTERVIEWER

What did Pound contribute, and what did Italy prompt—or can you separate them now?

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WRIGHT

Pound contributed *Cathay* to listen to and *The Pisan Cantos* to look at. Conversational tone in a high mode in the former, emotional road maps in the latter. Italy prompted a realignment with the world and its attendant possibilities. Actually, I suppose it goes a bit further than that. Which is to say, if form imposes and structure allows, then Pound imposed and Italy allowed. Reading Pound showed me there was a way to do what I had always wanted to do—to write—and Italy somehow allowed me to do it. I don't quite know how. Aiding and abetting, I guess. The same continuous sense of discovery everywhere I turned in the country that lay everywhere I turned in the books. I can separate them, of course, but the way you separate a glove from a hand. Or a skin from a snake. Still, Pound was a temporary obsession, a jump-start, as it were. Italy has continued in me to this day. A major battery, as it were. It has given me more than landscape, however. Montale and Campana, for instance, not to mention our main man, Dott. Alighieri. Morandi and all the painters. The fact is that I discovered, in a way, each through the other, and during the early days it *was* difficult to separate them. Now, though, to finish the image off, the glove is in the dresser but the hand goes on about its business. As for the snake, the less said about that the better.

INTERVIEWER

By the way, did you ever meet Pound while you were there?

WRIGHT

Actually, I never did. I came close once, in 1969, when I was living in Venice and teaching at the University of Padua. Jim Tate was visiting me and we arranged, through a mutual friend of mine and Olga Rudge's, Vittoria Cozzi, for the three of us—Vittoria, Jim and me—to call on Pound on a particular Monday. This was on a Wednesday, I think. Well, between Wednesday and Monday, Pound got a call about his honorary degree from Hamilton College and was already in the States by the time our appointment came around. It was his last trip

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to America, it turned out. Otherwise, I used to see him taking his walks along the Zattere off and on. I used to see him and Olga in Piazza San Marco before they left for San Ambrogio for the winter. He, as I recall, always wore (at least when I saw him) a beautiful camel's hair topcoat and a muffler. And a hat. He always wore a hat. I would see him occasionally, always with Miss Rudge, through the window at the odd restaurant. I remember wanting, early on, back when I was in the army, to go up to Brunnenberg to see him. We used to have maneuvers outside Merano, and Brunnenberg was close by—or relatively so. All this, of course, was just so much fantasy. You must remember that I hadn't even published a book and that Pound didn't speak. The closest I ever came was when I stood anonymously next to him under the porticoes of San Marco, looking at the church and the piazza one evening. But what was there to say? "I like your poems." "Is this the city of Dioce?" Besides, it was, in the end, the best thing, wasn't it? Standing side by side with him, looking at the most beautiful square in the world, in the city he taught me to look at in ways that would change my life. Water and silence. Some words, I guess, are better left unuttered. Or so they say.

INTERVIEWER

Let's stay in Italy a moment longer, but jump ahead across the years. It seems to me that in your most recent book, as in your earliest, Italy is a kind of sacred place for you—almost a motherland, while America is your fatherland. And of course you've translated Montale and Campana. Can you tell me—can you even tell yourself—what that landscape and culture have meant to you?

WRIGHT

Well, *Zone Journals* is about sacred places. Sacred places, language and landscape, and how they co-exist in each other, and speak for, and to, each other. The two primary sacred places in the book are the Long Island of the Holston River in Kingsport, Tennessee, where I grew up, sacred ceremonial ground of the Cherokee nation, and northern Italy, especially

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the Veneto region, where I first began writing poems. The center, the exact center of the *Journals*, takes place during a two-month period spent in a farmhouse outside Padua in the summer of 1985, with my family and Mark Strand and his family. The center of the center, as it were, is a description of a room of Renaissance frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara. They depict the tripartite levels of existence—everyday life, allegorical life, and ideal life. It's a concept that appeals to me. Anyway, yes, that part of Italy does have "sacred place" status for me. As does language itself, the most sacred place of all. And since my own sense of language was stumbled upon in Italy, I suppose that does make it a kind of motherland, place of rebirth and nurture, let's say, for pomposity's sake.

As for what that landscape and culture have meant to me, it's obvious I can't say. For over twenty-five years I've been trying to do so, but I keep coming up short and having to try again. I'll probably keep at it until the end, and come a-cropper all the way. But the very least I *can* say is that it completely restructured my way of looking at the world, it reordered dramatically the list of what is important to me in life, and it reshuffled forever my ambitions. Not an unnoticeable change. Its landscape has become the inner landscape I walk through, its paintings and literature—especially Montale and Campana, as you mention, and Dante as well—have become intellectual touchstones for me. It did, in the end, what any conversion does for you—it makes the scales drop from your eyes, and it changes your name.

INTERVIEWER

Then you returned to the States in 1961, and enrolled at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. What was it like in those days?

WRIGHT

It was much smaller then, about half the size it is now, and it hadn't reached the apotheosizic state it seems to dwell in these days. It had run through only one group of poets, basically, who were to become well-known—the Justice-Levine-Snodgrass bunch. It was probably better-known for its past

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teachers—Lowell, Berryman, Paul Engle—than for its students. It had had Flannery O'Connor in fiction, of course. It had just finished its first twenty-five years. Also, it was its own entity, funded out of Paul Engle's pocket and what he could wheedle out of Quaker Oats in Cedar Rapids and Iowa Power and Light. Now it's part of the English Department proper, with a huge budget and giant money from the James Michener Foundation. The jewel in the crown, as it were. And they've run a lot more people through it in the twenty-five years just past than they did in the first twenty-five. But it was a wonderful place for me. As I say, I'd never studied poetry as such, knew nothing about the writing of it, didn't even know what an iambic pentameter line was, had read nothing but Pound and Eliot and some Montale and Campana in Italian. Every page in my book was blank. I was twenty-six in 1961 when I arrived, and had never written a proper poem in my life. The workshop itself was housed in a group of Quonset huts left over from the time of World War II—there is a parking lot, without plaque, I might add, where they used to be. I was very lucky in having some wonderful classmates who taught me what and how to read, and what and how to write. Mark Strand, primarily, and Al Lee and William Brown. Neither Brown nor Lee write any more, but they were extremely talented and helped me enormously in the early days. Strand still does. Donald Justice was our teacher and controlled the entire technical and moral fiber of the workshop. He was exemplary in all ways. I probably learned more from him than anyone else who ever went through his classes. I was absorbent and soaked up whatever spilled out in the classrooms, in the bars after classes, in the offices, everywhere. Oh, I had so much to learn. And by the time I left, I did know what an iambic pentameter line was.

An amazing winter—at least by my standards—also led to the hot-house effect that the workshop had back then. We had twenty-five inches of snow on the ground by December first and didn't see the ground again until March. During one stretch of several weeks, the temperature never got above zero.

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God, it was cold. Nothing to do but read and write. Nowhere to go but indoors. As I say, I probably got more out of my two years there than anyone else who ever went. Even my Montale translations started there. I loved it.

INTERVIEWER

What about writing workshops? You have studied in them, taught in them—and over the years, no doubt, have seen them change.

WRIGHT

Actually, they haven't changed much, I think. At least not the ones I've had any connection with. Perhaps the students have changed—and I think they have, a great deal—but the workshops themselves are still the same process of give and take. More take than give, usually. I'm talking about from the writer's side. From the teacher's side, it's trying to give what the poem wants. More often than not, you tend to give more than the poem can take, both positively and negatively. Or more than the poem deserves. It can, of course, be very beneficial. I know of very few cases where it is destructive—and then only because of other, outside factors. I think it can be neutral, neither helpful nor harmful. But on the whole, I have found them to do what they should do—encourage the talented and discourage the not-so-talented.

I am, as I think I have intimated, almost a 100% product of the writing workshop system. And it was not only good for me, but necessary as well. I'm talking about graduate workshops now. The one I attended stood in for all the early writing guidance I never had, and saved me years of floundering and fooling myself that I knew what I was about when, in fact, I hadn't a clue. But not everyone was, or is, in my predicament. In fact, nowadays, almost no one is. In a sense, the original battle the workshop system had to fight, the lack of undergraduate writing instruction, has been won, and students come to the graduate programs already in possession of what we had only after a two-year graduate stint. The undergradu-

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ate departments have been almost totally infiltrated. Every campus has its poet and its fiction writer. The graduate programs now tend to be rather like feedlots or holding pens. Productive, perhaps, but maybe not wholly necessary. Still, there seems to be a market for them.

INTERVIEWER

Could we say that workshops help the apprentice poet make the inevitable mistakes—and realize them—more quickly?

WRIGHT

Certainly undergraduate workshops do. I think they are marvelous courses, as I tried to say just now—they seem to me to be pertinent components of any undergraduate English department curriculum. It's only the graduate workshops that I am of two minds about. Any undergraduate student who takes a workshop, whether he can write a lick or not, is a better student for the time he has spent there. A better reader and, one can hope, a better writer. You can't beat that. Now if he is one of the two or three every five years who may actually turn out to *be* a writer, so much the better for everyone all around. The same probably holds true for the graduate workshops as well, though the students seem less willing to make the mistakes. There is still much for them to learn, but too often they don't seem to want to learn it. They are still conserving what they learned as undergraduates and all too often seem willing to hole up in that accomplishment without trying to break through into another zone of contemplation, say, or further center of attention. Graduate workshops should be just as adventurous and abyss-jumping as undergraduate ones. Too often, lately, it seems to me that the students don't want to make the mistakes they need to make. It's as though the workshop were the end of something and not a pre-beginning. Hemingway said, "What you win in Boston you lose in Chicago." Too many students don't want to play in Chicago, win or lose. But if you don't lose in Chicago, you can't win in Boston. So you gotta play.

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INTERVIEWER

When you pick up a new book of poems—a book by someone else, I mean—what do you look for first?

WRIGHT

Hmmm . . . Music and substance, I guess, as most anyone would. One man's music, naturally, is another man's Muzak. One's ear is one's Virgil, however, leading you on. It's difficult, though, the older you get. You're harder and harder to satisfy. Meters become monotonous, measures become minimal, or non-existent. You keep harking back to the great dead, as Dylan Thomas called them, and asking where their like are. And, of course, their like are in the tomb. "*Mais où sont les neiges d'antan*?" Not a good question to ask. One looks for a reach, an ambition. One looks for language, an exuberance. Well, one looks for Hart Crane and Emily Dickinson, for Ezra Pound and Walt Whitman. There seem to me to be certain absolutes in whatever field of endeavor one is in. In business and banking they may be availability and convertibility, security and safekeeping, minimal loss and steady, incremental accession. I don't think it's that way in poetry, though such values will get you to temporary high places. Brilliance is what you reach for, language that has a life of its own, seriousness of subject matter beyond the momentary gasp and glitter, a willingness to take on what's difficult and beautiful, a willingness to be different and abstract, a willingness to put on the hair shirt and go into the desert and sit still, and listen hard, and write it down, and tell no one . . . Is that asking too much? Probably. Is there going to be someone to come along who fits this description? Probably. Will we recognize him when he comes? Probably not.

INTERVIEWER

In fact, how often do you find these qualities? Or any of them separately?

WRIGHT

Not often, obviously. Very seldom, in fact. But there are

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other, more minor virtues and felicities to comfort one. And in my own generation there are poets who I think incorporate some if not all of the major qualities I look for. Writers like Mark Strand and Charles Simic, C.K. Williams and Louise Glück and James Tate. I think Michael Palmer is onto something as well. There are many talented younger writers now, probably more than ever before, but I do find a caution among them that is more pervasive than one would like, a timidity about taking on something outside themselves, outside their reach. Jorie Graham tries a real reach, and I admire her for that. And there are some others. The problem with all of us as we get older is that we begin writing as though we were somebody. One should always write as if one were nobody, for that's what we are. In the giant shadow of Dante's wing, for instance, we are nobody and should never forget it. So we should always write out of our ignorance and desire and ambition, never out of some sense of false well-being, some tinge of success. There is no success in poetry, there is only the next inch, the next hand-hold out of the pit.

INTERVIEWER

The subtitle of your *Country Music* is *Selected Early Poems*. At the time, you had four books to select from. How did you go about it? By 1982, when *Country Music* appeared, your sense of a poem—and of your own poems especially—must have changed a great deal from what it had been twenty years before, when your first poems were published. Which of them still seemed valuable?

WRIGHT

To start with, I eliminated everything from my first book, *The Grave of the Right Hand*, except for the five prose poems which I used as a kind of "proem" to the larger structure I had been working on for about seven years, a trilogy of books—*Hard Freight, Bloodlines* and *China Trace*—that was sort of a past, present and future, an autobiography by fragmental accretion, as it were. Books—and poems—about family, child-

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hood, landscape and place. And one, *China Trace*, about the future, a spiritual future. The trilogy also had a structural progression, from a book of disparate, individual lyrics, through one of sequences and ending with a book-length poem—granted, an odd one, but one that has a character who goes from the first poem, where he shrugs off childhood, to the last, where he ends up a constellation in the heaven of the fixed stars—not enough belief to be able to get beyond what he can see, into the empyrean. Each poem is a chapter in the book, the book a little "pilgrim's progress"—with a small "p." What interested me then—and what still interests me when I have to think about it—was the accumulation of the three books, and not individual poems. Although I still have a fondness for "Skins" and "Tattoos" as poems, as well as for *China Trace*. Nothing actually seems "valuable," although some things, including those, seem retrievable. And even though each book one writes is in essence an apprentice volume, *The Grave of the Right Hand* was my major apprentice volume, so I was glad to be able to rescue anything from it. Thom Gunn once said to me that you'll like your first book much better as you get older. I've found that not to be the case for me. Which is, I suppose, the answer to part of your question—when I first started writing, I was interested in the tight weave of the surface only—technique as a statement in itself, so to speak. I no longer, in 1982, or now in 1988, believed this. Technique is half a statement in itself. It's a subject without a verb or object. As I went along, my books, I hope, started to reflect this. My interest in technical matters, the "how," has not lessened, but my interest in what I am trying to say, the "what," has become more than equal to it. Like a spider's web that is tight in its individual parts, but expandable in its larger structure, the entire poem trembles when any area is touched. Its meaning is almost invisible, but can be mortal to the right being. Or the wrong one.

INTERVIEWER

When you read through your early books today, do you have

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the sense of encountering a distinctive "Charles Wright" style in them?

WRIGHT

It depends on how far back you go. Before a poem called "Dog Creek Mainline" in *Hard Freight*, no; after it, yes. Which is to say, for the first ten years of my serious writing, no. It's odd, though, that I recognize more of what I'm trying to do now in stuff I wrote *before* I went to Iowa, when I knew *nothing*, than in the stuff I wrote between 1961 and 1971. The early stuff, as I've explained, wasn't any good—in fact, it was bloody awful—but the *impulse* was there, the reach and horizon were there.

Style is very important to me, actually. As far as I can see, there is no great art without great style, however sophisticated or unsophisticated it might be. All major writers are great stylists. Even Faulkner, in his way. It's too bad the term has come to be pejorative—all style, no substance. On the contrary. Major style usually, if not always, signals real substance. It's hard to think of anyone, from Hemingway to Yeats to Pound to Crane, of the major Moderns who wasn't a great stylist. And it isn't, of course, restricted to this century. I yearn to have a significant style. I want people to be able to look at a poem of mine on the page, read it, and to say, as though they had seen a painting on a wall, "This is Charles Wright."

INTERVIEWER

I sometimes think *I* can recognize one. And that's as much for what's been left out—a lot of discursive stuffing and expressionistic upholstery that clutters so much contemporary poetry—as for what's been included. There's a sound, a sweet-and-sour melody. There's a look, a jagged elegance. There's a pace, the jump-cuts and loping back. And above all, an ambition. Isn't that a part of style too?

WRIGHT

Well, yes, of course. But most of those, taken in the abstract, are surface. Except for the last one, the one that sends roots

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down and makes the thing take hold. And transforms the other three into more than meets the eye. Or ear. I mean, there is style, and there is Style. When everything clicks, style *is* Style, everything inextricably bound up in language and its ambitions, everything palpable in the *is*ness, the radiance that language offers. It's a concentration of the particular, I suppose, despite the gravity of the general. Transcendence inside its own skin. In other words, it tends to be not just how you write, but what you write as well, and why you write it. I feel about style the way Heidegger felt about being. It's inside, not outside. All those things you mention—sound and look and, what was it, pacing? and ambition, all have to come from an inner necessity, a "thereness," a *haeccitas*, that makes you write as you do. Jazz, for example, may be all style, but it's all soul as well. Everything that we see comes from something that we don't see. *Duende* or *dharma* or *dasein*, it all comes down to the same thing, you are what you are, and what you are in that secret place is what you write. Well, it's complicated, isn't it, and I haven't expressed myself very well. Clarity. Faith, hope and clarity. Some things are more difficult to clarify than others, aren't they? Great clarity is great style, however hard it may be.

INTERVIEWER

In *Bloodlines* you began to write sequences of poems, and that impulse toward length, juxtaposition, complexity, a layering of voices and memories, has marked each of your books since. What is it in that *kind* of poem that attracts you?

WRIGHT

All the things you mention, I guess—length, juxtaposition, complexity and layering. Especially juxtaposition and layering. Voices and memory. Actually, in *Bloodlines* and *China Trace*, though there is an extension of the under-structure—sequences in one, and the other being a long poem, now in forty-six parts—the surface weave is a continual tightening, winding it down as tight as I can make it. Again, the spider's web—the web gets bigger, but the pattern gets tighter and

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smaller. Begining with *The Southern Cross*, I set about unwinding the whole apparatus, and it gets increasingly looser through *The Other Side of the River* and into *Zone Journals*.

Montale said that all poetry rises out of prose and yearns to return to it. That sounds right to me. And the interesting place to work in is that yearning, between the two power points. Perhaps all poetry aspires toward the condition not of music, but of the prose poem. Another reason I got into lengthier gestures and juxtapositional organization was that I thought I had taken the lyric as far as I could in tightening it in *China Trace*. Relaxation seemed a good idea at the time. And that was about the time I began to look closely at Cézanne and Morandi, two painters who used space and structure in ways that appealed to me. I've tried to carry some of those ideas over into my poems. So, structural considerations, architecture in the poem, the use of space, design. The temporal surface, or the attempt to make a temporal surface that was extra-temporal, continued, of course, as it had always been—the first obsession. Not necessarily the greater but still the first. What attracted me? Amplitude, desire, the ventriloquism of the past.

INTERVIEWER

Is that true for *Zone Journals* as well? They seem more relaxed, more expansive than the earlier sequences.

WRIGHT

I think so. They are verse journals, remember, and are greatly concerned with line as well as story line. They are, I suppose, in as loose a form as I can work with and still work in lines. As opposed to sentences, I mean. One of the purposes of the journals was to work with a line that was pushed as hard as I could push it toward prose, conversational in tone but with the rhythmic concentration of what we call poetry. The journals' very nature, by definition, makes them more explicit. They are more didactic than other poems, perhaps, and more emotionally open. One tends to speak one's mind more nakedly in journals. One tends to say what is really troubling one's

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sleep. At the same time, of course, they *are* poems, with all a poem's avoidances and exclusions. Still, the word "journal" is operative, and allows more quotidiana in, and the speculations such dailiness leads to.

One more thing. Some years ago Octavio Paz called for what I seem to remember as a "Baroque-abstract" in painting. A kind of Mannerism. A non-pejorative Mannerism. I think that has happened in the work, say, of Frank Stella. I think it is also happening, here and there, in poetry. One could name names—Ashbery, for instance. It is a position that interests me as well.

INTERVIEWER

Let me go back to *The Southern Cross*. The splendid title poem of that book sets out, in a crucial sense, to be a very personal poem, but isn't by any means a conventionally autobiographical one. Autobiography seems central but intermittent in your poems. Is that a fair estimate?

WRIGHT

I think so. In fact, that's a splendid way of putting it. Central because it's always there, intermittent because it doesn't always show. Rather like the progression of the storylines in the poems themselves—central but intermittently in evidence. A submerged narrative, as it were. A kind of minus tide that runs just under everything and adds by subtraction. Anyone's autobiography, at least in his own eyes, is made up of a string of luminous moments, numinous moments. It's a necklace we spend our lives assembling. That's what "The Southern Cross" is about, saying some of those beads. But that "I" isn't *I* anymore. It's someone else, the character who plays me, someone who's a better actor than I could ever be. I'm just the writer. Someone else is starring in my part. I remember him just well enough to try to write about him. A case of the negative sublime. I guess art's always after the fact. The real is imaginary, or imagined. Reconstitution, reconstruction, representation is all we're left with. Autobiography becomes biography in the end.

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INTERVIEWER

As a Southern poet, you might be expected to favor a broadly narrative poetry. Though you've called some poems "Stories" or "Journals," in general you shy from straight narrative. Why is that?

WRIGHT

It's simple, really. I can't tell a story. Only Southerner I know who can't. And, in truth, I have no real interest in telling one. The point of telling a story is the telling; the story itself is not the point. I always wanted to get to the end and find out what the point was. Still do.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk for a minute about how you put a poem together. It seems to me that an apt metaphor for one of your completed poems is the X-ray rather than the statue. I mean, a reader can see through its verbal "finish," back to those memories that float as they do first in the mind, as *images*. Is that what starts a poem going for you—a cluster of images?

WRIGHT

It does, actually. Perhaps not a cluster. One would do. Something I see, usually; something observed. The "little dropped hearts" of the camellia blooms scattered under the huge camellia bush in my backyard in Laguna Beach fifteen years ago started the poem "Tattoos." And since "Tattoos" begat "Skins," you could say that those fallen blossoms were the beginning of the entire book, *Bloodlines*, as the other eight poems went in to accentuate or ameliorate the two long central ones. Of course, each one had its own separate trigger, but the initial pull was off the dropped blossoms. For example, "Skins" began not with an image but with a phrase, "there comes a time when what you are is what you will be." Then it went on from there. In the old days, when I was starting out—say 1959 to 1969—my poems almost always began with a rhythm, a little wordless riff I'd hear in my head. Then I'd try to fill in the blanks, even with nonsense words, if I had to,

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to get it down. I suppose it was because I was learning, or trying to learn, the meters—syllabics, accentuals, accentual-syllabics, and so forth. I always had these things going around in my head. There was a period when I almost thought in pentameter, and a period when every time I concentrated on something it developed into a seven-syllable line. After a while, after I came to be easier with these meters, if not at ease with them, my attention became more visual, and what I would see would begin to cluster, to use your word, around a sound pattern. When I began to work exclusively in free verse, around 1970, the images began to develop their own rhythms, I suppose, as they aggregated. Still, it's always been rhythm and image for me, as opposed to, say, ideas, that get a poem going. Mark Strand, for example, works from ideas, I'd imagine. I think very few of his poems begin with something observed. Observed physically, I mean. I often wish I were more like that myself, as I feel somewhat restricted. But I'm not. Which isn't to say an idea or two doesn't work its way in, but my poems don't start with one.

INTERVIEWER

How does memory fit into that kind of scheme?

WRIGHT

Well, memories . . . Hmmm. I suppose memory would be the invisible end of a vanishing rope, and the thing observed would be the visible end. Memory is the subjective correlative, to adopt, or adapt, the Reverend Mr. Eliot's vocabulary, of the seen object, and your job is to turn the equation around, to make the unseen seen. Instead of emotional equivalents, they become visual responses. The focus is on the *unseen*, and how these things are brought up into view through the unemotional lens of the tactile present. I don't know. I do like your metaphor of my poems being more like X-rays than statues, though. Revealing that which is hidden, unseen but not forgotten. Showing its relationship and necessity to the working organism of the present. The memories may float in the mind, but they are fixed in their functioning places in the body of

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the poem. This is beginning to sound like a lot of mumbo-jumbo to me. Theories always come after the poems. Theories are always secondary, no matter how intriguing we make them, or how compelling. Theories are easy. It's the poems that are difficult.

INTERVIEWER

And how do you know when a poem is, in fact, done?

WRIGHT

When I feel a theory about it coming on.

INTERVIEWER

Seriously, how do you know, if you do know?

WRIGHT

It used to be easy, as a matter of fact. In the old days—the old days are pre-*The Southern Cross*, all the early poems collected in *Country Music*—when I was more interested in the traditional, self-contained lyric, I'd know it when I got to the end, as I knew where, and what, the end was. And, in fact, I'd often start with the end, a last line or a last image, and work down to it. More recently, in the past ten to eleven years, it hasn't been that easy. If the poems nowadays are at all self-contained and box-like, they are like Chinese boxes, boxes within boxes. But more often they are too encompassing to be analagous even to that. Something like, for instance, "A Journal of the Year of the Ox" would be more like an aircraft carrier— many small lyrics riding on its superstructure. How's that for an outrageous linkage? Of course the "Ox" poem had to finish at the end of December, 1985, as one of its structures was the length of the year. But what went in, and what ended it, was very open. When I thought, or felt, the circle had almost been completed, I stopped. The same with the earlier poem, "The Southern Cross," which relied so much on memory, or on my inability to remember. When I thought I had not remembered enough, and that some neo-Platonic, neo-circle was almost complete, I stopped. Of course, I then went

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back and cut out over one-hundred and forty lines which seemed to me mere incidents and not true detail. If God lives in the detail, as Flaubert tells us, then only the incidental lives in the incident. You've got to be careful to distinguish between them. I guess there is more feel than formula as to where a poem ends now for me. It's probably never finished in the old sense, but just over. And given their more elaborate, incremental structures, that's probably a good thing. Or at least not a bad thing.

INTERVIEWER

Because you've published excerpts from it, I know you keep a notebook. Do you mine it regularly for poems, or does it have a distinct life, a different purpose?

WRIGHT

It's not exactly a notebook, not in the usual sense. It's a cross-breed, really, a combination commonplace book and jotting book. It has no narrative structure or ultimate purpose. Most of what goes into it has to do with poetics or ideas on art in general. The last thing I put in it was a couple of days ago, something about narrative and the image. Wait a minute, it's right over there, I'll get it. Here it is: "Narrative does not dictate the image; the image dictates the narrative." That sort of thing. Here's another: "One of the differences between poetry and prose is that—good or bad—lines are final. Sentences are never final, but are ceaselessly rearrangeable." Well, one could go on. I don't, as a matter of fact, mine it for poems, as you can imagine from those two examples. I used to write in it a lot more before I embarked on the *Journals*. Since part of the scaffolding of the *Journals* is process itself, and ideas about that process, I've been able, from time to time, to work those ideas into the texts themselves. It's especially apparent in "March Journal," for instance. Anyway, to answer your question, I suppose it does have a distinct life, or half-life, such as it is. It certainly has a different purpose. It's an escape valve for pronouncements to myself. You can hear it hissing over there if you listen hard enough.

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INTERVIEWER

Your poems have struck some readers as spacey, the work of a free-floating, delicately dissociated sensibility. And some of your effects, I'll confess, are eerily like pipe dreams. *Have* drugs played a role?

WRIGHT

That's what Hopkins said about Keats, sort of. Wait a minute. I put it in my "London Journal"—I mean my "English Journal." Let's see. Here, it's the first stanza of Keats's birthday entry: "Hopkins thought your verse abandoned itself/To an enervating luxury, a life of impressions/In Fairyland, life of a dreamer/And lacking the manly virtues of active thought." No pun intended, I suppose. And that from someone who practically hyperventilated on the Lord! Was Keats a laudanum-head? Not that I've heard. Maybe a drop here and there, but no De Quincey he. It's funny. I just reread *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater* last summer. Pretty good stuff for a junkie. Not to mention *The English Mail Coach*, which is even better. Well, I never thought of the effects, some of the effects, in my poems as, what did you say, "spacey"? Or like pipe dreams, a word whose origin I've just seen for the first time. Opium pipe, right? Hmmm . . . your question. Drugs have played almost no role whatsoever in my work. Certainly not at all when compared to someone like Rimbaud or Nerval, poets I admire greatly. Or even poets whose work I admire somewhat, like Allen Ginsberg, for instance. No role at all. Still, I have smoked some dope in my day. And I've drunk a little whiskey. And I've done some coke, as the saying goes. And only in one case has it had any physical effect on a given poem. I learned early on that I, in any case, had to separate the drug and the word. It was especially depressing when I was in my Rimbaud phase. I felt a total failure. The problem was I couldn't drink and concentrate—unlike, I understand, Faulkner could and Hart Crane could—and I couldn't smoke pot and concentrate. At least not on writing. I could certainly concentrate on nothing or nothing's trappings with a fierce intensity. The main problem always seemed to be that I wanted

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to have fun, and writing wasn't fun. It was work. So I smoked dope and giggled. I drank whiskey and wine and brooded, which was fun. When I was writing *China Trace*, back in the mid-70s, I tooted some cocaine after supper one night, went into the back yard on Oak Street back in Laguna, stared at the sky and then went into the little shack out there I used as a study and wrote a poem in ten or fifteen minutes. I was amazed. Total concentration, total focus and magnification. I was even more stunned the next day when I realized I didn't have to change a thing. I published it just the way I wrote it that night. It scared the hell out of me and I never tried it again. Ever. I realized that if I did it a second time, or so I thought at the time, I'd have to use coke every time I tried to write. So much for the rational disordering of the senses. I couldn't have afforded to write poems if cocaine was to be one of their ingredients. In fact, it was soon after that I stopped doing it altogether because it just got too expensive. Fortunately for me. I kept on smoking marijuana for some years, late at night, mostly, to go to sleep, but I've given that up too now. All I've got left is a dollop of Scotch at night and a little white wine. I never did LSD or mescaline, but did some peyote in the old days. Maybe it's that my senses are disordered most of the time anyhow, and my job is to rationalize them as much as possible. And when I slip, or don't do the job properly, the poems seem "spacey" and "free-floating." I've tried to anchor them as much as I could. I see no inherent virtue in ether.

INTERVIEWER

There's a story to be told about pot and your whole generation of poets, no?

WRIGHT

I suppose there is, though probably not by me. If, as Stevens said, "The book of moonlight has not been written yet," or something like that, surely the book of marijuana has not been written yet either. I guess what I'm trying to say is that there was more to the evolution of American surrealism in the late sixties and early seventies than just an injection of Spanish

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poetry from the thirties and Pablo Neruda and César Vallejo. They *were*, let's get this straight, the foundation and the "ark of the covenant," so to speak. But they also gave an artistic license or, better, an artistic alibi for the age. Nothing out of Breton was more surreal than watching tanks carrying dead and bleeding bodies, easing through the supper hour as millions swallowed the image along with their Hamburger Helper. The young poets were mirrors of the times, not the precursors. I think it's interesting that American surrealism's high-water mark was about a ten-year period, say 1965 to 1975, whose other high-water marks were found in marijuana smoking and the Vietnam War. And although, in many ways, all three are with us still, they have either been absorbed into the culture—surrealism into the mainstream of American poetry, marijuana into the mainstream of American drug abuse—or else the culture has grown around it, like a tree grows around an axe-head left in its trunk. Vietnam and the American body politic. Drugs and poetry have always gone together, from earliest shamanism up to the *Yage Letters* and on. It's not often that an entire generation gets involved in the practice, though, and I think that's what did happen, in varying degrees with various poets, in the time we're talking about. Was it a good thing? Remains to be seen. It certainly loosened up a lot of so-called academic writers, and that's not bad. Unlike Dada, which never got absorbed, or the current Language poetries, which I also think won't be absorbed—I imagine they both will remain as "examples," "exhibits," apart and behind glass—surrealism seems to have found its own current in the pluralistic American stream of poetic consciousness. If pot helped that along, far out!

INTERVIEWER

I guess what I really wanted to ask is a question about your daily routine—if there is one. Do you *schedule* your writing, or does it come in desultory bursts?

WRIGHT

I used to have a routine—for years I wrote in the afternoon,

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unlike anyone else I've ever heard of. When I was in Italy I translated Montale in the morning, and twenty years later, in 1983, I did it again when I was working on the Campana. But that makes it sound as though I had a fixed routine, certain hours when I did certain things. And I don't have any such thing. And never did except for the hour-and-a-half it takes me to read the newspaper each morning. Of course there's B.C. and A.D.—Before Child and After Delivery. The past eighteen years have been much different from the nine before that. And certainly better, I might add. The beginnings of my little experiments with dislocation and discontinuity, the abstracting of the storyline, all took place out of necessity in my case. Time was grabbed when grabbable, what with teaching, family and all the other emanations bidding for its services. Innovation was the child of necessity for me. My poems became, or started to become, disconsecutive, going from stanza to stanza as units rather than from beginning to end as a seamless piece. Later, in *The Southern Cross*, *The Other Side of the River* and *Zone Journals*, I tended to make an aesthetic of such impulses, and to widen them. All of which really doesn't answer your question, does it?

INTERVIEWER

No, but it answers another question, and I'll ask it in just a minute. But first, let's get back to the business of your schedule, and if you have one.

WRIGHT

No, I never did have a schedule, though I was chipping away at things rather consistently. When I *was* working on something, I worked on it every chance I got, morning, afternoon or evening. So work *would* come in bursts, but not desultory ones. For instance, on "A Journal of the Year of the Ox," I seemed to be working every day that year. Obsessively. Of course, I tend to think about writing obsessively even when I don't have a project. I'd *like* to be writing all the time. I seldom read novels any more because I don't want to get caught up in something that might take me three to four days, or

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longer, away from thinking about poems. This hardly becomes justifiable when I go, as I have done, three months or longer between poems. But one must protect one's standards, mustn't one? For a highly organized person, as I am, my writing schedule is wholly erratic.

INTERVIEWER

Now let's circle back to the answer you were giving just before. You were talking about a new kind of poem you started writing—a poem of impulses, of disconnected stanzas linked by association. That gravitates toward the short poem, and our literary culture has always had an appetite for long, sprawling poems. We spoke earlier about *sequences*, but what about the long, through-composed poem? I remember some of your critics used to call on you for one. Has it ever been one of your own desires?

WRIGHT

Well, sure, of course. What red-blooded American boy, *et cetera*. The disconnection of stanzas started in *Hard Freight* segued rather nicely into the sequences in *Bloodlines*. Then I wanted to do a book-length poem, a—as you just described it—"through-composed" poem. And I did, though one that was so camouflaged that almost no one noticed it as such. Helen Vendler did, and said so, and I'll always be grateful to her for that. The book was *China Trace*, and you and I talked about it somewhat just a little while ago, how each individual poem was a chapter in an ongoing story about a character who went from childhood to his demise and inscription in the heaven of the fixed stars. As I say, it was a series of short poems linked by an unspoken common narrative, a journey, even if it was more spiritual than actual. And that book, that poem, is where the idea of the subnarrative, the submerged narrative, started taking shape for me.

Now here's something that's kind of interesting, at least to me. Disconnection and association, as you so cleverly pointed out in your question, seem to be linked with the short

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poem—with the obvious exception of *The Cantos*, of course—and one thinks of Dr. Williams and Company. It was interesting to me to try it in longer reaches—not interminably, like *The Cantos*—and I've made several attempts at that since I saw it emerge in *China Trace*. The first time was in "Homage to Paul Cézanne," and it was fairly short and crude. Eight overlays, each different, hoping to form one consistent picture. In "The Southern Cross" it got a bit more sophisticated, but it was in "A Journal of the Year of the Ox" that it became what I had hoped it might. The structural elements—the four entries about the Cherokees and the Long Island of the Holston, and the long sojourn in northern Italy—of "sacred places," as well as the natural one of the four seasons, plus the visits to the two great American medieval writers, Poe and Dickinson, and the two great Italian ones, Petrarch and Dante, *et cetera*, all combine to both hide and expose the story line, which is, like most story lines, circular. It deals with circumference, as Emily said her business was. It's mine, too, the outer boundary. In its way, "Ox" is a longer poem than the whole book *China Trace*, though probably not as vertical. Well, they are my two favorite things. Of my own, I mean. Which still, I guess, doesn't answer your question.

One of my problems has always been that I can't remember things that require sequence. I seem to remember only consequence. Which is to say I can't seem to remember ideas or principles or how to do things. I remember incidents, I remember details. Which is why, and here I'm trying to circle back to your original concern about long poems being done with the devices usually associated with short ones, all my long poems seem to me like short poems in disguise. But I suppose any non-surface narrative poem will seem that way. Still, it's a way, isn't it, of keeping the pithy elements of the shorter lyric and holding onto the illusion of the long, effusive gesture. A kind of an American sprawl of a poem with a succession of succinct checks and balances. Epiphanic and oceanic at once. Intensive and extensive. The long and the short of it. Now *that's* American.

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INTERVIEWER

And let me ask you about getting older—that is to say, about the effect of writing experience on your work itself. I mean, you now know your way around a poem better than you did twenty years ago. Does that make it easier to write or not? And at the same time, do your higher standards make it more difficult now?

WRIGHT

I suppose I'd have to answer "yes," and "yes." But it's not really that easy because I don't write the same kind of poems I did twenty years ago. So, in a way, I'm where I *was* twenty years ago, and the answer could be "no," and "no." Actually, it gets more difficult all the time. In the mid-seventies I began experimenting, in *China Trace*, with what I called, for lack of a better word, subnarrative—which, if I were Italian, would be *sottonarrativa*, "undernarrative," surely a more felicitous phrase. A story line, but one not always in evidence. But always a story line. In the poem "The Southern Cross" I started to get the hang of it, and I've been bending it and stretching it ever since. So it's *always* a poem, or a formal proposition, I don't quite know how to handle when I write it. Add to that the fact that one's ambitions, one's aspirations for the poem and what it can convey, are higher and harder to come to terms with the older one gets, so it's always a heavier load the farther down the road you get. I suppose if I were still writing the poems I wrote in *Hard Freight*, or the same *kind* of poems, the entire enterprise would be lighter and more acceptable, though not to me.

Since 1980, when I wrote "The Southern Cross," I have also actually *written* differently. Which is to say, I guess, *rewritten* differently. I've tended to do it more *in situ*, as it were. I get every section the way I think I want it instead of going back over a full draft of a poem. Perhaps it has something to do with the length, but also it has something to do with the concept of the poem and its ultimate reach. It's *always* difficult. Now and then. Beauty is difficult, Pound said, quoting Yeats. Beauty is difficult. So is articulation.

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As for getting older, I don't see much to recommend it, except that it makes you despair more of ever saying what you think you want to say. So you work harder when you work. Otherwise, as I say, I see little to recommend it. Although despair is a kind of joy, isn't it?

INTERVIEWER

I'm not quite sure I understand what you mean by "subnarrative." Could you explain it a bit more?

WRIGHT

I'm not sure I can, actually. Undernarrative, *sottonarrativa*, is about as close as I can get. The smaller current in a larger river. The story line that runs just under the surface. It's broken, interrupted, circuitous, even invisible at times, but always there. Which is to say, it's not a "logic of image," or a balancing of blocks or a "logic of the irrational" or whatever. It's a continuous story line by someone who can't tell a story. Subnarrative. Its logic is narrative but its effects are imagistic. It's like what Augustine says about Time, more or less: "I know what it is if I don't have to explain it. If I have to explain it, I don't know what it is." I don't know, it's just what I've come to do.

INTERVIEWER

Can a reader be expected to know what is "in" or "behind" a poem? And if he can't, then can it really be said to be in the poem at all?

WRIGHT

Well, I think so. I mean we're not talking about the Holy Ghost here, our Main Mover. We are talking about something that is, in a sense, tactile. It is there as surely as the story line is there in "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" and "The Witch of Coos." It's just not as continuously evident to the eye. I'll give you an example. When I was in China, we went by train from Xi'an to Chengdu, a sixteen-hour trip. One part of the ride was along the Jaling River, where the roadbed ran along-

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side the mountains. Many tunnels. Many, many tunnels. The landscape was particularly gorgeous because of the river and the crop patterns along it, as well as the flowering fruit trees. But we were in the tunnels so much of the time that the landscape became flashes of intense color and concentration as it emerged, hung there for a while, then disappeared as we entered another tunnel. And while it was in evidence, the color and patterns and design were twice as luminous as they would have been had they remained constant and usual. Each time the landscape appeared, it was unusual, but it was basically the same landscape all the way down the river, a constant thread that you sometimes saw and sometimes didn't, but was always there. I would hope that subnarrative, *sottonarrativa*, would work somewhat in this fashion. It is always "in" or "behind" the poem. What was the second part of that question? Weren't there two parts?

INTERVIEWER

Yes. If the reader can't "see" the hidden narrative, can it really be said to be in the poem at all?

WRIGHT

As I say, it *is* in there. If he can't follow it, or know it, I guess I feel he isn't concentrating. There are *always* signs, there are always the openings between tunnels. And even if there weren't, if the story line were submerged totally, like a mole, say, and all you could see was the broken path under the ground and no mole at all, would you really be able to say there was no mole there, or that there had never been a mole there? We're not talking about faith here, we're not talking about the Great Incarnator. We are talking about something visible, something you can see if you look for it. Even when it's least visible to the eye, it's there all right. In the poem—a place the reader must be as well.

INTERVIEWER

You've just been using—I don't know how self-consciously—some religious metaphors, and they remind me of that strain

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in your poetry. Not just the metaphors and rhythms and diction, but the argument itself. The poems seem suffused with the *stuff* of religion, but without any apparent belief—and it's the absence I mean when referring to your argument.

WRIGHT

They do, don't they? I mean seem suffused with the stuff. I guess because *I* was so suffused with the stuff, at such a high pitch, at such an impressionable age, and for such a long period of time—without ever believing it, really—it keeps coming back up on me. As though I had over-indulged. The taste stays in my mouth, a taste that is not displeasing to me, but it is not exactly something I anticipate with pleasure. I think I probably would *like* to believe. I believe in belief, for instance. And it *is* the greatest myth going, isn't it? All those fabulous aspirations and assumptions! I mean, if it *were* true, what could be better? Everlasting life! I'll take a hit off that, thank you very much. Just because you don't believe it doesn't mean you don't like to talk about it, or think about it. Besides, I *do* believe in the efficacy of things unseen. It's just that I don't believe in this particular one. And there's no point in just believing in the trappings, in the manifestations. Flannery O'Connor was right about that, I think—if it's just a metaphor, the hell with it. Or words to that effect. I mean, what could be better than being raised incorruptible in the body like St. John?

Hmmm . . . Even though I don't have anything more to say, I feel as though I *should* say something else. I mean I'm sort of surprised myself it should seem so suffused with this stuff. After all these years of running away from it so hard, it's rather perplexing to find that it's invaded my subconscious like the invisible worm that flies in the night. Well, so be it. I guess if one considers, as I do, the true purpose of poetry to be a contemplation of the divine—however you find it, or don't find it—then it isn't so strange that my work is so suffused with the *stuff* of religion. We take the vocabulary we are given—in my case, Christian—and use it to our own ends. We try to develop and expand what we are given.

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INTERVIEWER

A contemplation of the divine. I guess that should include the textures of the world as well as an outline of the infinite.

WRIGHT

I would hope so. Certainly that's what I've been saying for the last five years, explicitly, in the *Journals* I've been writing. And, for the twenty years previous, implicitly in just about everything I ever wrote. The textures of the world *are* an outline of the infinite. Stevens said, or at least I seem to remember that he said, the thing seen becomes the thing unseen. He also said that the reverse way was impossible. Roethke wrote that all finite things reveal infinitude. What we have, and all we will have, is here in the earthly paradise. How to wring music from it, how to squeeze the light out of it, is, as it has always been, the only true question. I'd say that to love the visible things in the visible world is to love their apokatastatic outline in the invisible next. I think all this, you understand, in my better moments. In my darker ones I'm afraid I rather think the way Philip Larkin did—not anxious for an "endless extinction." But we are defined by our better moments, aren't we? Surely we are. Otherwise, God help us.

INTERVIEWER

And language, finally, is both texture and outline?

WRIGHT

Language is the element of definition, the defining and descriptive incantation. It puts the coin between our teeth. It whistles the boat up. It shows us the city of light across the water. Without language there is no poetry, without poetry there's just talk. Talk is cheap and proves nothing. Poetry is dear and difficult to come by. But it poles us across the river

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and puts a music in our ears. It moves us to contemplation. And what we contemplate, what we sing our hymns to and offer our prayers to, is what will reincarnate us in the natural world, and what will be our one hope for salvation in the What's-To-Come.

—J. D. McClatchy

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Barbara Jordan

"A Skull Enwalled Garden"

—from *Visions of the Fathers of Lascaux*
by Clayton Eshleman

When, in the evening, I explore the succulent shadows
with their blue veins and black chrysanthemums,
their thorny places,
and the galaxy of milk that life is—then what I am
and am not
falls away. When I open the dictionary,
there is a beetle which lays its eggs
on the bodies of mice and birds
before it buries them. Again and again, the page where
it lives
falls open. The etching is nineteenth century
crosshatched, the beetle studiously digging a hole,
the rodent nearby, on its back, feet curled.

When I was twelve, I found *Gods, Graves, & Scholars*
in the library.
I don't know why I took it down,
but I saw—isolated as if for surgery—the unwrapped
Head of Tutankhamen,
the blighted face. His empty eye sockets were more
distant
than all the winter stars when I took out the trash
and looked until my neck ached.

Something in the bushes would rustle and scare me,
because a soul is full of windy spaces,
but I thought nothing could get in unless I let it
willingly.

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Once from an upstairs window, I stood dazed
watching the Aurora Borealis—rare at that latitude—
churn the night sky like a quartz fish-mud;

What for these strange facts remembered? Melon seeds
in the stomach
of a Chinese Princess, dead 2,000 years. This page
a sack of warm wind, and cloud-swamped avenues
and trees
that hold up the sky dorically;
while to sit on, the kind of tufted grass I like.

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Two Poems by Andrew Hudgins

As a Child in the Temple

"I'm looking forward to my death," she said.
I sat upright. I watched her blond hair sway,
this college girl who taught our Sunday School.
"In death, we'll see God face to face," she said.
"Now through a glass darkly; then face to face."
She cried a tear or two, composed herself,
and said, "Let's turn our Bibles to First John . . . ."

I didn't. "Hell," I whispered to a friend,
"If she's so hot to die, who's stopping her?"

But now I'm older than that girl, by far,
and in my memory she's gone into
her wish to die, a couple of tears, a sob,
and now, most vividly, that swaying length
of ash-blond hair—that hair, and my relief.
The mere fact that I didn't understand
meant that I wasn't Christ. I was reprieved,
saved, not for the last time, by my ignorance.

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Castrating Bulls with My Grandpa

The tail, held back along the spine, keeps them
—most times—from kicking you. I don't know why.
As Pa clamped down on the bull's sack, I dropped
the tail to watch. The bull lashed out and kicked
Pa backward through the wall of his old shed,
and Pa got up, picked up a four-by-four,
and, with three blows, drove that Bull to its knees,
and, with two more blows, drove it to the ground.
He finished clamping off the balls in silence,
drove to the doctor's house. Three broken ribs,
a ruptured spleen. He didn't yell at me.
He groaned each time the pickup hit a bump.
He screamed when nurses carried him inside.
But he never said a word to me, or told.

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S. Ben-Tov

Clouds Over Jerusalem, in Winter

As if they were trying to build on a different thought
the clouds accumulate between sun and the city,
so the beams go wide and break into sheaves of light.
It is as if the clouds were trying to reflect the city

without interference of what makes objects and colors
hard and sharp. From the washed, pale stone they are the
breath
between our words, and the sound of Shiloah running
underground
released to the upper air, so soft, so limitless.

They are like the explosion between a woman and her lover,
spears, fountains, pregnancies of air, sleep's furrows,
changing without changing their nature,
and one bedsheet rumpling on a line is like a child to them.

They are the builders who would take us up in their arms,
but they have built only a Jerusalem of thoughts.
From the sides of the clouds bloom our epic episodes,
bloodless. Bloodless.

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Rust

Josip Novakovich

If you walk through the green and chirpy tranquility of the park around the castle at Nizograd, Yugoslavia, past the Roman Baths, you will come upon a monument that might appear unseemly.

Two dark, bronze partisans are stuck on a pedestal uncomfortably high, back to back, one perpetually about to throw a hand grenade, another shoving his rifle into the air and shouting a most terrifying metallic silence from the depths of his chest, his shirt ripped open, challenging bullets to pierce his heart. Their noses are sharp, lips thin, cheekbones high, hands large and knotty; everything about them is angular—a combination of social-realism and folk art. This type of sculpture is common in most Eastern European towns; the larger the town, the larger the proportions of the sculpture. However, there is something unusually fierce in the grim faces of our monument.

The monument was done by Marko Kovachevich, a sculptor educated at the Moscow Art Academy who was a Communist before the war, when it was dangerous to be one, when you could be jailed or executed for it.

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During the war, he fought as a partisan against the Germans and won several medals. After the war, the Communist Party commissioned him to erect the monument to those who had fallen. He received so little money for it that expenses for the materials were barely covered; his work was appreciated as a comradely contribution to the cause. Party members from the neighboring town wished to have an exact copy of the monument, and Marko asked them to pay in advance, which they did. The monument completed, there was a great ceremony—the uncovering of the monument by the mayor after speeches of great dignity. The crowd gasped at the sight of the bared monument; the partisans were as small as dolls. The crowd was about to stone Marko, but he said, "Comrades, small money, small partisans." The people laughed and the officials ground their teeth.

Marko excommunicated himself from the Party, flinging the red membership book into the garbage in town hall.

Since in a poor socialist country nobody can afford sculptures except the government, and he no longer wished to work for them, Marko could no longer make a living as a sculptor. He became a tombstone maker, specializing in the tombstones of deceased Party members.

He moonlighted as an art teacher and, as such, was loved and feared by children. His presence was imposing: tall and heavy-boned, a massive hooked nose, like Rodin's, and rising eyebrows like Brezhnev's. His hair, the color of steel, was cut several times a year to a centimeter's length, so that it looked like the bristles of a hedgehog. The hair grew quickly, obeying no conventions and leaping into various shocks and cowlicks. Even when it was long, his donkey ears stuck out, with some hair of their own atop each lobe. Whenever he entered a classroom—a room with greasy wooden floors in the castle, a huge building with thick walls, high ceilings and chandeliers—he would shout the assignment to us: to draw a tree whose branches in the wind scratched the windowpane, or the profile of our neighbor, or something out of our imagination, something we had never seen before.

Then he would pull four chairs together, take off his boots,

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put one beneath his head, the way Jacob put a stone beneath his, and soon the room resounded with snoring, as if a tank were tearing up the road, whereupon we would sneak out of the classroom into the park, to climb trees and dig with branches into the soil for small Roman and Turkish coins—the town was established 2,000 years ago as a hot springs spa and was renewed by the Ottomans. Waking up half an hour later, he'd shout out the tall baroque windows for us to come back.

Before the end of the two-hour lesson, he would stroll down the aisle, looking at our drawings.

"What's this?" he asked me.

"A tree," I answered proudly. I had paid painstaking attention to details.

"I don't see it. A tree lives, has a soul. Yours is a bunch of doodles."

He took a pencil and drew a line down the tree. The graphite pencil-tip broke, and flew off, hitting the window pane. Marko continued to draw the line, unperturbed, through the core of what the tree should have been, and sure enough, it began to look like a tree, irrespressible, ready to resist tempests, almost challenging them to arrive.

"See, you give it marrow. This is no beauty salon. First you make a tree, and what you do with it later—whether you put lipstick on it, eyelashes—that's incidental. But let it *stand* for Heaven's sake!"

By such a simple intervention he gave the tree character distinctly his: uncollapsible grand simplicity. How, I wondered, does one learn to impart character with one stroke? Can one learn that?

He often assigned us to print inscriptions: HEREIN LIES IN PEACE. . . The inscriptions he liked best, he used on tombstones.

Marko chewed gingerly, like an old wounded lion, telling us our region was poor in fluoride. I used to bring him apples from our garden just to see what trouble eating them gave him. But one day as soon as he entered the classroom he shouted for silence and stood on the table. In the posture of the partisan on the pedestal who is doomed to shove his rifle

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into the air for the remainder of eternity, or until a new regime comes to power, our teacher pulled out his front teeth and shoved them towards the gasping children.

"Comrades, asses! I have new teeth. They will give me no pain. If I get tired of them, I put them in a glass of water. When I need to chew or give a speech, I put them back in. Progress! Do you hear, that's called progress!" Then he fitted the upper teeth back into his mouth, and grinned through the pink and white plastic at us, closed his mouth, and masticated so that the muscles on his jaws kept popping, making a seesaw pattern, his jaw clanking. We watched silently, our eyes popping, disgusted. Then, to demonstrate that the teeth were not only for show, he called my name and said, "Now bring me one of those apples."

I leapt to the window and lowered myself into the park and was soon back with a crunchy apple. Marko slowly chewed it in front of us, grinding the teeth sideways, the way a bull ruminates, turning his head a little to the left, a little to the right, so we could all see how it worked. "That's art, my children. It makes life good, that's what art should do. Now you can go home. You've learned enough for today."

One spring day, he stood on a chair and shouted, "Comrades, you need some real life, some hardship." He pointed at me and two other boys, because we were the largest in the class. "You go to the junkyard and ask for Marko's cart. Then pull it to my home."

As we pulled the laden cart, the junkyard keepers laughed at us, calling us donkeys. We heard chilling screams of pigs being slaughtered at a nearby slaughter-house. The cart squeaked under the weight of chains, parts of engines and crowbars of old school buses, whose blue and rusting bodies lay outside the junkyard, like tired elephants. Panting, we hauled the metal uphill, through and beyond the town, where the park turned into forest, on the edge of the cornfields.

His house was a grand sight—the redness of its bricks cried against the green forest in the background. Its massiveness cast a long shadow over the backyard, prostrate and vanishing in the darkness of the woods. What was in the shadow attracted

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even more attention, so much so that the bright house would sink into a shadow of your mind, while the darkened objects in the backyard would begin to glow—planks of wood with bent nails sticking out, bike chains, rusty train wheels, tin cans, cats, buckets, winding telephones, a greater disarray than Berlin on May 2, 1945. The backyard seemed a witness to the collapse of an empire. Marko seemed entrenched in a war of sorts, with chaos gaining the upper hand. That a teacher—the sort of being that teaches you cleanliness and orderliness—had such uncheckable, exuberant garbage made me shake for joy.

One half of the house was finished, the bunker-like downstairs with rusty rods sticking out, as if a cage had been cut through. The upstairs was empty, with large looming windows. As you approached the house, tripping over empty cans of paint, the door silently opened a little. A woman of worn-out countenance peeped around the door, expecting nothing but evil from the other side. She wore black as if her husband, Marko, were dead. Perhaps she wore it for her mother and father, or perhaps because the Marko she had once loved was dead.

It seemed there had to be enough junk, but Marko kept hauling the rusty metal to his yard once a week for several years. Out of the junk he erected two iron pillars, connected on top by a steel beam from which hung a pendulum. A whole series of cogs and chains connected the pendulum to a motor emitting blue smoke. I thought he was building some kind of modern sculpture, something he had learned in Russia. The mechanism looked like an updated guillotine, its rustiness notwithstanding.

A large steel plate formed the base of the pendulum. He chiseled out a groove in a stone for the blade. The blade rasped over the stone, while he stood on the side, masticating contemplatively, constantly adjusting his teeth. Now and then he poured water over the stone as if baptizing it, though of course it was too late for baptism; it was a tombstone. His cats ran off into the woods, but returned, transfigured into hedgehogs, staring at the monster who ate stones.

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Marko became a sort of town attraction. From the Roman baths in the park you heard the moaning and rasping of the stone-cutting machine from a mile away, like a steam engine gasping up a steep hill toward you. In the summer, idle adolescents, retired captains, crippled war heroes, children with jam moustaches, and even some tourists came by to take a look at him, most of them without a comment, as if observing an abstruse museum piece. Because of the noise, he could never hear your approach, and even if he could, he wouldn't bother to turn around and see if it was a stranger approaching, or merely his cats upsetting woodplanks and buckets. Once, as I stole up to him bent over his stone, he said to me, without looking up, "Could you pour water over the stone once a minute?" and gave me an aluminum cup and a bucket.

On holidays, he took walks and attended public assemblies, where he often raised his voice, using folklore expressions like "Fuck the Sun," and some other ones involving various members of the Divine Family.

In 1971, on the Day of The Republic ("Commemorative holiday of the founding of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia"), when there were nationalist tensions between Croatians and Serbs, he interrupted a vague ceremonious speech by the mayor, and shouted, "Comrades and Comradesses, enough bullshit. Our bureaucrats are liars and hypocrites. God has created us equal. In front of Him we are blades of grass and ashes. So, why all this nonsense, why do some of you shout, I'm a Croatian, and others, I'm a Serb, what the hell's the difference? Who should care? Let me tell you, God doesn't." And he proceeded to preach in the middle of the atheist, communist assembly and nobody stopped him. Religion and proselytizing were strictly confined by law to the churches; religion was considered a disease, a crutch for those who had no courage to face the finality of life. As a Baptist, I had seen many religious people of courage remain silent about religion in public. And here, a Communist whom I thought a nonbeliever spoke out, and I felt proud of our shared faith in God. Shivers ran down my body into my shoes.

When he sat down, there was a long silence, marred by

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throats clearing phlegm. Thick blue smoke hovered like a large wreath above the assembly. The mayor tried to go on with his speech as though nothing had happened, but nobody listened to him.

Because Marko Kovachevich had to work so hard as a tombstone maker, he took advantage of his job as a teacher, snoozing while he let the children raise hell, wrestle, and throw paper airplanes; but now and then he shouted: "Silence! Work!" If we ignored his shouts, he'd rush straight toward a boy—he always believed there had to be a gang leader—and grab him by the ear, twisting it. "Boy, I need to wind the clock. It's not break time, it's class time. Get it?"

Once, seeing a girl crying, he asked her why, and she pointed at me and said, "He slapped me."

"Comrade," I said, "She spilled lemonade over my watercolor painting" (an eagle descending upon a rosy piglet).

Marko jumped over the table, grabbed the hair on the scruff of my neck, and shouted, "Painting you call it! Even if it was . . ." and he struck me with his fist—I saw stars and heard thunder even though my eyes were closed and my hands covered my ears.

"That'll teach you. I am beating a beast. You aren't the beast. You are a fine boy. But there is a beast in you. The only way I can reach it is through your skin. Let's hope some of the pain gets to that beast. Nothing is efficient in this life, I know, it's a waste of energy and pain, but . . ." And another slap. "Now repeat after me, Girls are to be kissed."

"Girls are to be kicked," I echoed. Whereupon Marko kicked me with his ox-hide soles fortified with iron crescent moons. I flew down the aisle, landing in a heap at the end. I limped for a week afterwards.

And when a boy released a stone from his slingshot, shattering a lamp on a post outside the window, Marko shouted, "Come here, beast!"

"No, Comrade, it wasn't me."

"Come here, I'll show you your God."

"But Comrade, I didn't . . . ah . . . do . . . I . . ."

If the mountain won't come to Mohammed, Mohammed

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will go to the mountain. The boy wouldn't come to the mountain, so the mountain rushed towards the boy. The boy leaped, knocking over several benches. Marko grabbed a coal shovel and hurled it at the boy. The weapon struck the wall a couple of inches above the boy's head, digging a hole in the loose mortar of the castle, while the boy rushed out the door. The mortar sand hissed as it trickled to the ground. Marko's gray eyes glared fierce and savage and he ground his teeth as if the boy's bones were there to be chewed—Poseidon chewing a member of Odysseus's crew fallen overboard. Had the weapon struck several inches lower, it would have cracked the boy's skull open; but, so far as I know, he killed no pupils. He was mostly pacific and ignored us the way a bull ignores flies. Of course, a bull's tail whips horseflies away now and then.

Visiting him at his home, and wishing to appear smart, I mentioned Aristotle and Plato to him once. He flung his hammer and chisel onto the ground, and gestured toward a pile of tree logs for me to sit on. He too sat down, and said, "Do you know the essence of Plato's philosophy?"

"Well . . ."

"It's the death of Socrates. You know why he was killed? He raised his voice against tyranny. That's how it was then, and that's how it is now. Nothing's changed. Our government is a bunch of tyrannical crooks."

"But there's more to Plato," I protested, though I hadn't read Plato.

"Yes, there's less to Plato. He had to write cryptically because he was surrounded by spies. You must learn how to read. There is politics everywhere."

"But here you have freedom . . ."

"In a manner of speaking. But do you think I like making tombstones? I used to hold a high post in the Party. I was about to be elected the Minister of Culture of Croatia, but I spoke freely against their Mercedeses and champagne. Since I had contacts in the Soviet Union, they discredited me as an informer. They sent me here into the province, behind God's back, so I wouldn't be in their way. This is my Siberia. But enough of this. There's a living to be made. I must support

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the old hag and the young hag. See, my daughter is pregnant, her fucker left her. I need to make her a room upstairs. She'll need the space for her bastard."

He spoke with acerbic, Serbian bitterness.

He walked back to his stone and paid no more attention to me. He hit the broadened head of the chisel with his heavy hammer, bluish steel cutting into bluish gray stone, stone dust flying up in a cloud. With his gray hair and bluish stubbly cheeks he blended into the grain of the stone; all you saw was a stone and a pair of upwardly curved eyebrows. The metal rang dully in a mesmerizing rhythm; your ears hurt as if you were descending in a plane, and you stared at the tombstone of a yet-unnamed dead man, whose face had no nose, no ears, no eyes, only stone and eyebrows. Passing by his house, people heard, saw, smelled work.

It seems to me I visited him often, but I did so only a few times, each of which left a strong impression that multiplied in my mind. Once, when I was depressed over having let loose my hawk, having failed to train it, I visited him and found him shoveling gray cement dust into a cement hole, into which he poured water. "Hello!" I shouted.

He didn't reply. I addressed him again and he turned round and looked at me as if I had misunderstood something.

"Why do you always work?" I asked, as if he had misunderstood. How could it be that the man whom I admired for his freedom was a slave to work, more than any other?

"God works six days a week, and who am I to work less? The whole creation labors, and so must I. Read Genesis."

"But if work is punishment, can't you avoid it?"

"No, you cannot run away from the wrath of God. You must work. If you don't, you grow weak, indulgent, slothful, and a thousand vices and vipers poison you."

"But can't you rise above that?"

"There's no rising above. Nobody can rise so high as to oppose God Almighty. In the sweat of your brow . . . that's how you have to live. If you fail to accept the punishment, God will destroy you."

He looked like a bleak judge pronouncing the sentence of

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life imprisonment, a whole life in the Siberian labor camps. He grabbed a shovel aggressively as if he would smash my skull with it. He strained his seesaw jaw muscles as he spoke. I shrank back.

"But isn't God love?"

"That's right, he wants you to stay out of the reach of the devil, and you do that by work."

I was more dejected than the young man who asked Jesus what more he should do to be saved and was told to give up all his riches to the poor. Homework, hauling wood and coal at home, all work I knew as a torment to my body and mind; the work interfered with my daydreams—mental loafing. My freedom.

"Is there heaven as a reward afterwards? Hell as punishment? Is that why you work?

"God will not burn you in hell the way Italians grill frogs. He is no Italian. There is no hell. There is no heaven either."

"No eternal life?"

"One life is enough. If you love God, it is enough for you that God will live on. The Creator learns from what he creates. The more you work and create, the more He learns through you. Your eternity is in the knowledge of creation, which survives in God. As that part of him, you live on."

I made no reply and daydreamed about my hawk—will it live on its own in the wild? Maybe I won't see it again. He gripped a heavy hammer and chiseled away the rough edges of a stone, refusing to answer any more of my questions. His hands were large, with thick cracked skin, and several of his nails were blue from the misses of his hammer. His tendons went prominently into his fingers, which looked like rakes with blue earthworms and snakes, his veins, twisting around each tendon like the emblem for medicine. The skin of his palm was like the skin on the soles of a barefoot boy in a mountain village in the middle of the summer. Layers and layers of blisters and dead skin, one atop another, burying one another, the dead burying the dead. The callouses were tombstones of the once-alive skin. The palm was a record of hard work. It could be studied archaeologically. Each layer of the skin

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signified a different stage of suffering: tombstone-making, sculpture, rifle handling in the army, ploughing in the fields in his youth. Chiseling into the stone, he wrestled with time, to mark and catch it. But time evaded him like a canny boxer. Letting him cut into rocks, the bones of the earth, Time would let him exhaust himself. He would run out of time and out of himself. He was being spent in epitaphs, which would remain even as he sank into the dank green earth. Gray widows would stare into the night, looking in the outlines of the epitaphs for the ghosts of their beloved in the bleakness of the stone by faint moonlight, candlelight, expecting that by the shifting candle-flicker something in the stone would begin to move and flicker into life. Marko, and all of us, would be no more than the whistle of the wind in the pines, an octave higher than a screech-owl's.

But the idea of work disturbed me more than the idea of mortality. "But still, don't you relax and enjoy yourself?"

He took out his teeth, washed them in the aluminum cup, put them back in, and answered, "There. I've just enjoyed myself."

"But, can you just work? What good is life . . . what's there to life if . . .?"

"This—work, eat beans, fuck, turn to the wall, fart and snore; work, eat beans, fuck, turn to the wall, fart and snore. That's the logarithm of life."

"Well, how about esthetic pleasures, music, art, literature?"

"The fiddle is of no use in the mill." He pointed at the stone-cutting machine. "This is enough music for me. Painting. Paint-smearing. Literature. Garbled words of sloth-ridden people who want to talk their way out of work."

As for TV, radio and the newspapers, he replied, "A bunch of propaganda."

"How do you keep up then with the news?"

"I read history."

"What does that have to do with the news?"

"There's nothing new under the sun. You can find out what is going on by reading about thousands of years ago."

"But what if a war broke out?"

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"That would be nothing new."

"But you might find out too late and not have enough time to run away."

"In the war there's no running away. I would not stop working. Besides, war would be good for my business; tombstones would be in demand."

And he resumed work. Conversations with him could not last more than five minutes at a time. As I walked down the steep hill through the park, his machine roared on.

Marko Kovachevich respected the May Day. At night during the parades he stood in the shadows beside a kiosk, like Jonah awaiting the destruction of Nineveh. I greeted him, "Zdravo." He muttered in return, "Sodom and Gomorrah. Just look at it. All these girls running around naked and the guys don't even look at them." (It was the mini-skirt era.) "Look what it's come to. You lift the tiny cloth and stick it in! What godlessness!"

His mutterings surprised me; he had made several sculptures of naked women decades before. I had seen them in his cellar.

His daughter claimed he was strict and puritanical. Throughout her childhood, he'd kept an eye on her. In her teens, to keep her away from the town "dogs," he had locked her in for days, but it didn't have the intended effect on her. She eloped at the first opportunity, without examining the character of her lover. He left her pregnant after half a year of free love. Despite helping her out financially, Marko became extra-moralizing, which made it no easier on his daughter. His influence was so strong that she too became an art teacher—a painter as well as a sculptor; but rumor had it that if you were a virgin, all you needed to do was visit her and she would initiate you. Her promiscuity hurt Marko's pride.

Marko looked aggrieved, like a medieval portrait on which there's not even the flicker of a smile. He grieved over what had come of it all: the country, and the family. I guess he was a bitter old man.

Seven years after graduating from the gymnasium and moving out of the country, I saw him on July 4, the day of libera-

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tion in Yugoslavia. How much he had changed! In his face there were still signs of strength, of his great strength, there in his glistening eyes, beneath the horned eyebrows. Something had changed in him though. His face was more sunken than before. His body had grown weaker and the stubborness in his eyes stronger. They were larger, more fierce. But no, it was not the eyes that had done it. It was Time. The old Marko had been buried in time. Time had chiseled into his face so steadily that you could tell how many years had passed just by looking there. His flesh had lost vigor and the vigor had moved into his eyes. Even his eyes seemed to have shrunk. They were a little grayer as if with glaucoma, as if the stone had entered them and had begun to turn him into stone, as Lot's wife was turned to salt. The work of time is black magic. Time drains a bit of tissue from under the skin and drains it down the lymphatic channels, out of the body, until only the skin and bones remain. But time does not stop; it thins the skin, empties the bones of their marrow. Only the skeleton remains under the tombstone. Seeing shrunken Marko, who had struck me as being as permanent as the tombstones he made, I was startled and afraid to look into his face. We shook hands. He masticated as he used to, his jaw muscles popping up, and said: "For God's sake, where have you vanished to?"

"I live in the States now. I'm studying philosophy for a Ph.D."

"Philosophy in the States," he said skeptically as if the choice of the continent was wrong. "They will teach you nothing. Come on, visit me in my workshop, and I'll show you what philosophy is!" He spoke in his take-the-whole-world-by-the-throat voice. "I'll tell you some things I have understood, something nobody here nor there understands. If you listen to me, you'll demolish all the philosophers over there by the force of your arguments. You'll sink them." He spoke calmly, spreading his arm forward and moving it level with the horizon, with a distant look in his eyes, as if he were leveling the American cities to the ground. I chuckled; he had become even more bellicose and preposterous than before.

Several years later, after abandoning my studies in philoso-

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phy, I returned to Nizograd. I walked through the park, to the periphery of the town, towards his old house. Where there had been piles of rust, there was a garden now, and in the garden sat his daughter, reading a book, and a child was swinging on a swing, hung on a branch of a large oak.

I walked in and asked about her father. The swing stopped, the child ran into the house, and bumblebees buzzed, bending stalks of flowers, as she closed her book and told me he had died several years before.

He had been ill for a year, skin and bone, and he had sunk, as unbelievable as it sounded, into the ground before his sixtieth birthday. In the war, in the mountain forests, sleeping in torn tents in snow, sleet, rain and mud, his kidneys had rotted. So, while he had appeared to be a man of steel, he had been instead a man of iron, rusted inside, though standing embattled and firm as if the war had not ended.

Jehovah's Witnesses wanted to bury Marko Kovachevich in their way, Serbian Orthodox priests in their way, and the Communists in theirs. Marko Kovachevich had left a spoken will with a friend of his who also had earned a couple of medals as a Communist partisan but had no faith in the Party. If somebody wanted credit for having a medal, Marko's friend would reply, "So? Even my dog has a medal, and you wouldn't vote for her as mayor, would you?" In the streets you could often see his bitch with a medal around her neck and a shopping bag in her teeth, proudly carrying groceries home. The friend and Mrs. Kovachevich warded off all the groups that fought for the right to bury Marko Kovachevich—no easy task since there was no written will that dictated how he should be buried. Now that Marko was dead, it was easy for the townspeople to claim he was one of them and to be proud of him. Kovachevich was buried according to his will, without a star, without a cross, without angels, and without food—as is the Serbian custom—on his tomb.

Atop his grave was placed one of his own products, a cubic tombstone from his own machine, formed by his own chisel, with the inscription cut by his own hand. His stone arose

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among many stones, sticking out of the ground like a tooth among many sparse teeth on the lower jaw of Mother Earth—a molar crown among crowns.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

John Banville lives in Dublin and is the literary editor of the *Irish Times*. His novels include *Doctor Copernicus*, *Mefisto* and *Kepler*, which won the 1981 Guardian Fiction Prize. *The Book of Evidence*, excerpted in this issue, won the Guiness Peat Aviation award for the best book published by an Irish author in the last three years. It will be published by Macmillan in the spring.

Nadine Gordimer is the author of nine novels, including *July's People*, *A Sport of Nature*, and *The Conservationist*, which won England's Booker Prize, as well as several collections of short stories. Her collection of essays, *The Essential Gesture*, was published by Knopf in 1988.

Josip Novakovich emigrated to the United States from Yugoslavia at the age of twenty. He is a graduate of the Yale Divinity School and has published stories in *The New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, *London Magazine*, *Antaeus*, and other magazines. He teaches English and history at the Santee Sioux Community College in Nebraska.

POETRY

Bruce Bawer is the author of *Diminishing Fictions* (Graywolf Press, 1988) and a regular contributor to *The New Criterion*. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Hudson Review*, *Boulevard*, and elsewhere.

S. Ben-Tov is the author of *During Cease Fire* (Harper & Row, 1985). She is a past recipient of the Bernard F. Conners Poetry Prize and a winner of

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the National Poetry Competition. She is currently working on her second book of poems, *Herzl's Apple*.

Laurence Breiner lives in Boston and writes on Renaissance and Caribbean subjects. He is currently completing a book entitled *The Premises of West Indian Poetry*. His work has appeared in *Partisan Review*.

Hayden Carruth's most recent book is *Tell Me Again How the White Heron Rises and Flies Across the Nacreous River at Twilight Toward the Distant Islands* (New Directions, 1989). His *Selected Poetry* was published in 1986 by Macmillan. He teaches in the graduate writing program at Syracuse University.

Marc Cohen's collection of poetry *On Maplewood Time* was published in 1989 by the Groundwater Press, Intuflo Editions. He lives in New York City.

Gabrielle Glancy's work has appeared in *Caliban*, *Fiction*, and *Quarry West*. She is currently translating two books, one by Marguerite Duras and another by Jean Genet, to be published by Amok Press.

Jorie Graham teaches at the University of Iowa and is the author of *The End of Beauty* (Ecco Press, 1987).

Gerrit Henry is a contributing editor of *ARTnews* and writes reviews for *Art in America*. He is the author of *Janet Fish* (Burton Skira, 1987).

Edward Hirsch is the author of several books of poetry, including *For the Sleepwalkers* (Knopf, 1981) and *Wild Gratitude* (Knopf, 1986).

Martha Hollander is the 1989 recipient of the Walt Whitman Award. Her first book, *The Game of Statues*, is scheduled for publication this spring by the Atlantic Monthly Press.

Andrew Hudgins teaches at the University of Cincinnati. His books of poetry include *After the Lost War: A Narrative* (Houghton Mifflin, 1988) and *Saints and Strangers*. His work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Kenyon Review*. He has also received an Academy of American Poets Award and an Ingram Merrill Foundation Grant.

Jerzy Jarniewicz is a Polish poet, translator, and literary critic. His collection of poems, *The Corridors*, was published in 1984. He has translated works by Philip Larkin, Craig Raine, James Fenton and Ian Hamilton. Currently, Jarniewicz lectures on English literature at the University of Lodz.

Barbara Jordan's first book of poems, *Channel*, won the 1989 Barnard New Women Poets Series and will be published in April by Beacon Press. Her poems have appeared recently in *The New Criterion* and *Sulfur*. She will teach creative writing at Boston University this spring.

Paul Lake is the author of two collections of poetry, *Another Kind of Travel* and *Walking Backward*. His work has appeared in the *Yale Review*, *New Criterion*, and the *Southern Review*.

Joseph Lease's poems have appeared in *Pequod*, *Temblor*, *The Quarterly*, *Boulevard*, *New American Writing*, *The Boston Review*, and *The Paris Review*.

William Logan's most recent book is *Sullen Weedy Lakes* (David R. Godine, 1988). He received the 1988 Citation for Excellence in Reviewing from the National Book Critics Circle. He is living in England for the year.

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FEATURE

Donald W. Faulkner is the editor of *The Portable Malcolm Cowley*, forthcoming from Viking Penguin in March, 1990, from which this correspondence was taken. He teaches at Yale and is currently working on a book about the Cowley-Hemingway correspondence.

INTERVIEWS

Jodi Daynard teaches writing at Harvard University and is working on her first novel.

J.D. McClatchy, currently a Guggenheim Fellow, is the editor of *Poets on Painters: Essays on the Art of Painting by Twentieth Century Poets* (University of California Press, 1988). His collection of essays, *White Papers*, was published this year by Columbia University Press.

Kathleen Wheaton is the author and editor of two travel books, *Spain* and *Buenos Aires* (Insight Guide Series), and is a correspondent for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The San Francisco Examiner.*

ART

Annette Lemieux was born in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1957, and lives in New York. Her works have been shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and Josh Baer Gallery, New York.

Joan Nelson was born in Torrance, California, in 1958, and lives in Brooklyn, New York. Exhibitions of her paintings have been held at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, The St. Louis Art Museum, and Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

Richard Prince was born in the Panama Canal Zone in 1949, and lives in New York. Recent exhibitions have been held at the Centre del Carmen, Valencia, Spain, Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York, and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

ERRATUM

The name of the cover artist for issue 112 of *The Paris Review*, Robert Mangold, was misspelled in that issue.

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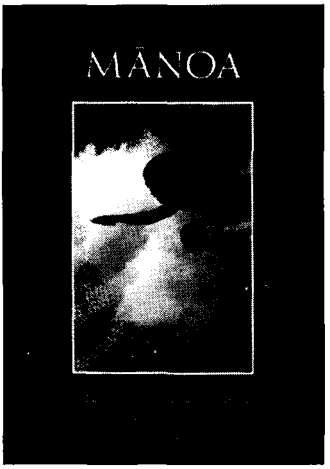

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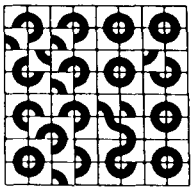

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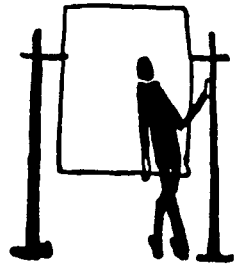

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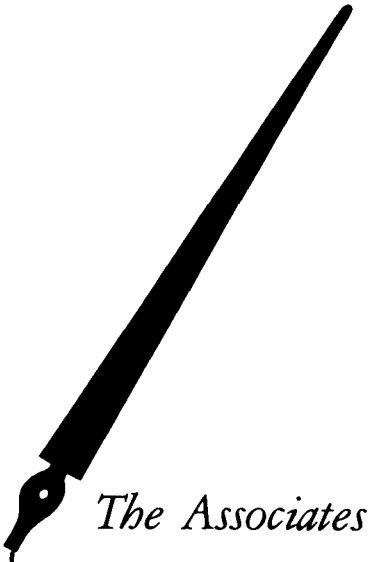

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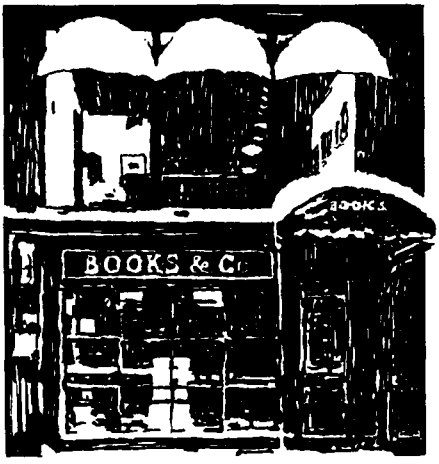

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